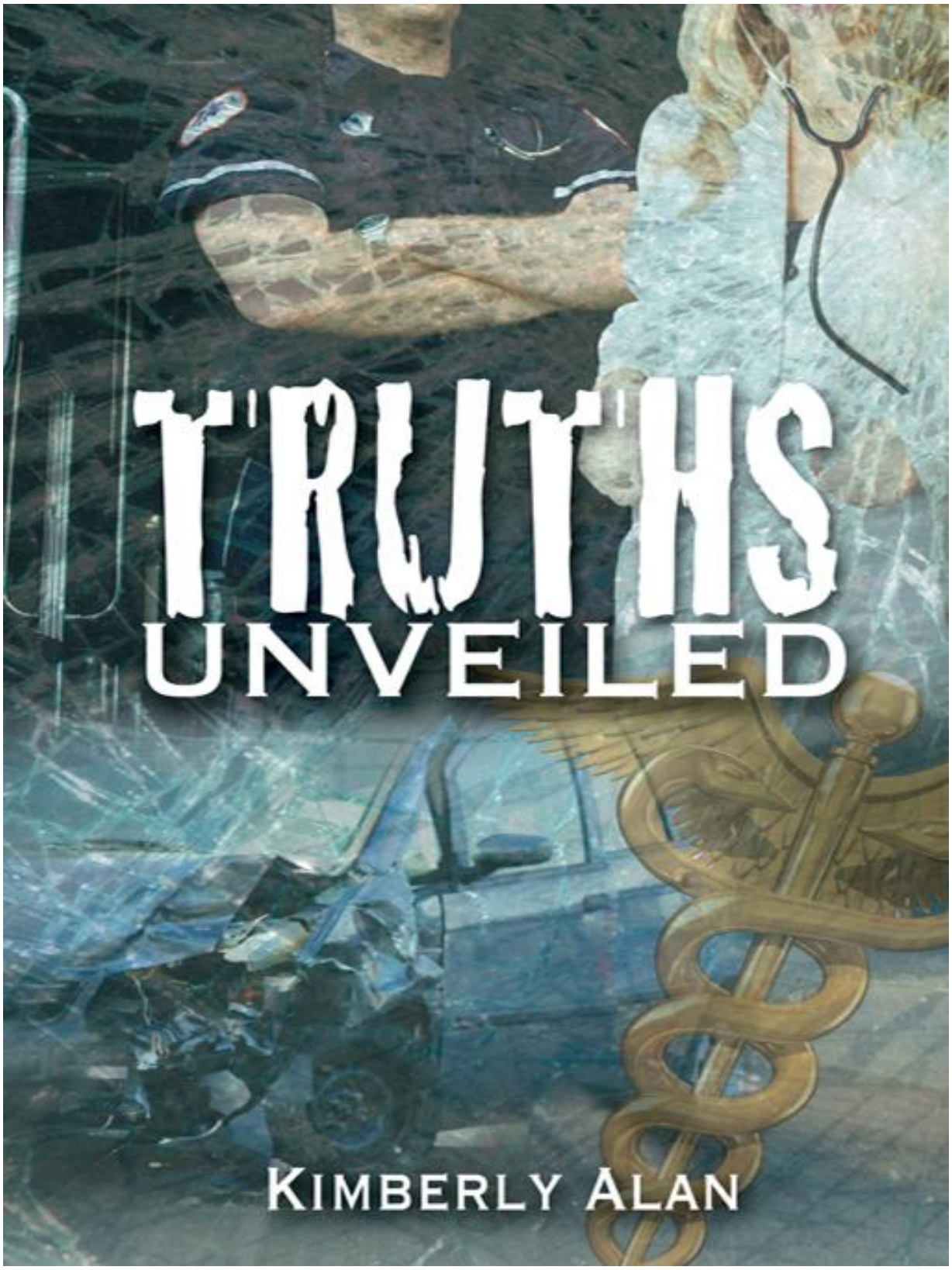
TRUTHS
UNVEILED
KIMBERLY ALAN

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Unlocking her hotel door, Pam relived the past few hours.

With everything else being equal, Tom Jarrod could tip the scales either way. On one hand, if she moved back here, and the past caught up with her, she could lose everything. On the other, if she just left and didn't return, she could be giving up the best thing that ever happened to her.

For the most part, Pam never gave much consideration to a social life. Sure, in recent years there hadn't been much free time. But now she realized that had been her excuse. More accurately, she didn't believe she deserved a serious relationship. Yet, in these past twenty-four hours, Tom changed that.

Getting undressed, Pam wondered, Can it work, God? Is Aunt Carolyn right? Is this why you sent me here? So I could learn to forgive myself, and for Tom and me to start over?

The exuberance Pam began experiencing last night while with Tom doubled its strength. Smiling and feeling like a giddy teenage, she found the mystery novel she'd started reading on the plane. A long hot soak in the tub sounded great. Heading toward the bathroom, she noticed the bathroom light, glowing under the semi-closed door. No big deal. Maybe the maid forgot to turn it off when she cleaned the room. Armed with the book and a nightshirt, she opened the door. Then froze in terror.

Taped to the large mirror above the sink, Pam saw what appeared to be the original newspaper article and photograph. There was no mistaking the headline. She recognized it before her brain registered the words: TWO TEENS DEAD IN FATAL CRASH! ONE DRIVER SURVIVED!

Underneath the article, someone had written in red, YOU KILLED THEM! LEAVE HERE NOW OR FACE THE CONSEQUENCES!

Truths Unveiled

Reviews

"Kimberly Alan writes a story of faith, hope and love. What better combination could a reader ask for? When the characters face conflict and

crisis, Ms. Alan not only gives them the tools to triumph, but the reader will be drawn into how faith can twist fate in TRUTHS UNVEILED."

~Lori Avocato, bestselling author of Dose of Murder and the Pauline Sokal mystery series, published by Avon

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by

Kimberly Alan

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Truths Unveiled

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by Kim Mendoza

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Truths Unveiled

Dedication

To my aunt, Carolyn Ferrara Woodworth,

and fellow author, Lori Avocato,

for their infinite encouragement

and all the laughter we've shared over the years.

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Chapter One

“I’ve got to be out of my mind to come back here,” Pamela Harrington muttered. She turned the rented Explorer into a service station just outside Middleton’s city limits. A quick peek at her watch told her she’d been driving nonstop for close to three hours.

After parking the truck alongside a gas pump, she switched off the ignition and released a deep breath. Chicago General was a top-notch, metropolitan hospital. And they offered her a fantastic job as an emergency department physician. So why was she here, out in the middle of rural Pennsylvania?

“Fill ‘er up, ma’am?”

Startled by the interruption, Pam jerked her head toward the open window. Smiling, a young, red-headed attendant waited for her response.

“Sure. That will be fine.” She stepped outside to stretch her cramped muscles.

“You that doctor who used to live around here?” he asked, placing the gas nozzle in the tank.

Pam’s over-anxious nerves shot to a new high. She held up a hand to shield her eyes from the sun’s bright rays, burning low in the late afternoon sky. She wanted to make this trip anonymously. Clearly, that wasn’t going to happen. She gave him an inquisitive stare. “What makes you ask?”

Grinning, he pointed his chin toward the inside of the truck as he washed the windshield. “Simple deduction. Your hospital ID is laying there on the seat, the back bumper sticker says you rented this vehicle at the airport and you meet the physical description.”

“I’m impressed,” Pam replied, removing a fifty-dollar bill from her pants pocket. “Care to tell me who’s interested in my arrival?”

“Sure,” he shrugged. He replaced the nozzle and gas cap, then took a pen from his back pocket and wrote out a receipt. Handing it to her, he said, “My cousin. He paid me ten bucks to call him when you got this far.” Then he flashed a mischievous grin. “Want to make a counter offer so you could surprise him yourself?”

Pam’s eyes and smile widened simultaneously. She held up the bill. “Sorry. This goes toward the gas. What’s your name, anyway?”

He touched the rim of his baseball cap. “T.J. Jr., ma’am. At your service.”

Studying the attendant’s features, Pam felt a mixture of fire and ice soar up her spine like nasty bee stings and settle at the base of her neck. “As in Thomas Jarrod, Jr.?”

He sent her a wink. “That’s my cousin. I’m Timmy Jarrod, Jr. So what do you say? Want to reconsider my offer?”

Before she could answer, a deafening roar, like a crash of thunder, rumbled nearby. T.J.’s bewildered eyes locked onto hers. The ground beneath their feet started to shake. It lasted several seconds. The shrill of a siren immediately followed.

T.J. darted toward the building. “That’s the fire signal!”

Instantly alarmed, Pam followed him into the tiny convenience store portion of the gas station. Once inside, she heard a calm, steady voice giving instructions over a scanner.

“Signal Ten. Companies One, Three and Four. Explosion at the Power Master Tool Factory, 43 Sumner Avenue. Multiple injuries reported. All Middleton companies responding. Be advised, Middleton Regional Rescue is also being dispatched.”

“That’s me!” T.J. grabbed the portable radio and a strobe light. “This is Fire Fighter 132. I’ll be responding to the scene.” He motioned for Pam to follow him outside, then locked the station door. “Hey, your truck’s better than my old pickup. Can I drive?” He ran toward the vehicle, then stopped and looked at her. “You are that doctor, right?”

Pam gave him a quick nod. “That’s me.” She tossed him the keys. “How far is it?”

“About ten miles. I think it’s an industrial park.” He started the engine. Then he pushed an adapter into a power plug and placed the flashing blue light on the dashboard.

As Pam buckled her seatbelt, T.J. floored the gas pedal, lurching them forward. The tires squealed out of the lot and onto the road.

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Tom spoke clearly into his emergency radio. “Medic One to dispatch.”

“Medic One, go ahead.”

“Dispatch, I’m at the scene. Requesting Rescue Flight Helicopters and all available medical rescue units to this location. Alert the burn unit. Be advised, this building is fully involved. Over.”

“Roger that, Chief,” the dispatcher replied. “They’re on their way. Neighboring towns are also responding. Over.”

Stepping out of his truck, Tom looked around. Walls of orange flames, laced with thick black smoke, danced high in the afternoon sky. It was as if they were in tune to the tempo of the sirens piercing the air. He released a deep breath. The flames had already spread through two of the factory’s neighboring buildings in the industrial complex. Fueled now, they moved on at a seemingly unstoppable pace. Taking in the scene, he whispered, “If you’ve got a minute, Lord, we could sure use some help around here.”

At that instant, three fire trucks appeared and expertly parked near the hydrant. At the same time, Tom could hear helicopter blades in the distance. A half dozen ambulances and police cruisers followed. “Thanks,” he whispered, welcoming them with a wave. “Good to know you’re listening.”

“Tom!”

T.J.? He turned to find his young cousin right behind him.

“Look who I got!”

Tom’s glance darted from the teen’s beaming face to the tall blonde in khakis and a blue, pinstriped shirt. He stopped mid-stride, as if colliding into a stone wall. Pam!

Tentative, she met his shocked gaze. “Where do you want me?”

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Chapter Two

“I need a medic over here!”

Tom spun toward the voice yelling over the fire’s crackling thunder. It came from a firefighter exiting the burning building. He carried a victim over one shoulder.

Tom looked at Pam and grabbed his medic bag. “Let’s go!”

Approaching the patient now lying on the grass, Tom noted he was unconscious.

“I found him in a hallway,” gasped the distressed fire fighter.

Automatically, Tom reached to find the victim’s pulse. “He’s still breathing,” he told Pam. Continuing to check the vital signs, he noted Pam taking a spot opposite him and loosening the man’s collar. He also noticed that, for a moment, she’d closed her eyes. She was praying, he realized.

“Look at his nose,” she pointed, a second later. “It’s charred and swollen. From inhaling a lot of smoke.”

“Agreed.” Back to business. Tom rubbed his knuckles into the man’s chest, trying to elicit some kind of response. Nothing. He reached for his portable radio. “Medic One to Rescue Flight.”

“Go ahead, Medic One.”

“How far out are you?”

“Two minutes.”

“I have a priority transport for you at the factory’s southeast entrance. Bring a backboard, oxygen and your monitor.”

“Roger.”

Tom reached for his intubation kit and watched Pam get the IV started. The patient’s airway was swelling shut from the superheated gases in the burning factory. There wasn’t much time.

“Pam, do me a favor,” he asked, seeing her finish. “Grab an ambu-bag and hook it up to my oxygen cylinder. I’m going to tube him.”

Already in the groove, she found the equipment.

Tom knew she’d done this plenty of times, but only in a hospital. She was in his world now. And seemed to catch on quick.

Gathering what he needed, he leaned on one knee and inhaled the burnt air. The wet earth seeped through his pants. Meanwhile, a helicopter

hovered above. The blades drowned out the sound of the still arriving engine sirens.

Tom took a glance at the sky. It bled red from the setting sun. Glowing embers and ash swirled through the black smoke below. At the same time, portable radios filled the air with orders being barked out and acknowledged. No. This was definitely not a hospital emergency room.

Tipping back the patient's head, Tom carefully inserted the laryngoscope blade into his mouth, gently pushing his tongue to one side. Charred wasn't the word, he thought, seeing the blisters forming everywhere. Slowly, but surely, they multiplied, threatening to close the airway shut. With the vocal cords in sight, Tom fed the tube needed to help the patient breathe. He then took the ambu-bag from Pam and attached it to the end of the tube. Slowly, he squeezed it. Thankfully, the man's chest rose. "Check his lungs," he told Pam.

She took his stethoscope and placed it on the patient's chest. If she could hear equal lung sounds on both sides, the intubation tube was in the proper place.

She gave him a thumb's up. "You're in."

"Thanks. Now hold the tube and bag him while I tape everything in place for transport."

Tom grabbed a roll of tape from his bag. Without thinking, he put his hand on Pam's to help her hold the tube. The touch was quick. And distracting.

"All set, Chief?"

Tom hadn't noticed the chopper landing or the paramedics wheeling over the stretcher. "Yeah. You're all set." He stood. "Keep the fluids going. He's burnt pretty bad, and his airway was already swelling when I inserted the tube. "

Both medics nodded. In a flash, they loaded the patient onto a stretcher and whisked him away to the waiting chopper.

Tom turned to thank Pam for her help. Instead, he saw her already running to the next victim.

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"That's the last of them," Pam heard someone announce. The sound of doors slamming and a siren followed. Filthy and still running high on the adrenaline rush, she leaned up against a standby rescue unit to catch her breath.

Glancing at her watch, she realized the time. Ten after nine. Though the fire still burned, it was finally under control. Most likely it would continue for several more hours, then sizzle and smoke for days. At last count, she heard eleven patients left the scene by helicopter and over sixty by ambulance. Fortunately, so far, there were no fatalities. Considering that a miracle, she whispered a grateful prayer of thanks.

Inhaling, Pam noted the putrid smell of burning plastics and other artificial fibers that continued to fill her nostrils. Littered with ash and other debris, the wet street shimmered from the lights overhead. It was quiet now. And dark. The radio's incessant flurry of activity finally reduced itself to only an occasional transmission, releasing neighboring fire and rescue units from the scene.

"Did you enjoy the fireworks celebration? I arranged it just for you."

Caught off guard, Pam stood straight. She knew Tom would show up eventually. During the emergency, they had exchanged quick glances and orders, but nothing more. And certainly nothing to suggest that fourteen years had passed since last seeing each other. But that was an entirely different story. Keep it light, she told herself. Meanwhile, her heart pounded and the back of her neck burned.

"I don't think the word 'enjoy' paints an accurate portrait," she countered, looking around at the wreckage. "But I'm certainly impressed. You really didn't have to go to all that trouble. A cake, minus the candles and calories, would have been fine."

Tom's deep laugh filled the cool night air. "That was the original plan. Obviously, the old boiler in that factory thought you deserved something more dramatic."

Smiling, Pam rolled her eyes. "Obviously."

"Thanks for your help. The timing couldn't have been better."

"I'm glad I was here." She paused, then added thoughtfully, "The rescue teams responded remarkably."

"So you approve?"

"Definitely."

"Good. Then the fire wasn't a total loss. It gave you an idea of what to expect if you decide to accept the medical center's offer."

Startled, Pam met his bright eyes. Challenging, mischievous but at the same time, gauging her reaction to him. They held for a moment. Then she broke the connection.

“How do you know about that?”
Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Three

Before Tom could answer, his radio crackled on his hip.

“Medic One, here. Go ahead,” he responded.

Pam listened as the female dispatcher said, “T.J. dropped off the keys to Dr. Harrington’s vehicle at the Red Cross station. She might be looking for them.”

Surprised, she realized that in all of the excitement the young gas station attendant must have taken her keys when they first arrived. She started to say something, but Tom made a motion to wait. Looking at her, he said, “Roger that, Dispatch. Thank you. I have the doctor with me now. We’ll come get them.”

We will? Pam’s thoughts shouted, emphasizing the we. What’s that about? And she still wanted to know how he knew about the job offer.

“Sounds good. Roger and off.”

Ending the transmission, Tom indicated that they should walk. “I saw the Red Cross truck parked around the corner.”

Pam knew that the charitable agency typically stayed at this type of emergency scene to provide food and drinks to the remaining fire fighters and other rescue personnel.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m sure I can find it. You must have a ton of things to do.” Like go home to your wife and child, she thought to herself.

Tom shrugged, continuing to lead the way. “It’s no big deal. I’ll go with you. Do you want to eat now, or see the medical center first?”

Pam nearly tripped over her own feet. Once again he caught her off guard. She was still trying to figure out how to ditch him. And why did he want to hang around with her anyway? “Excuse me?”

He winked, then widened his grin. “I’m sure you’re hungry. But you’re probably also anxious to see the place. So which do you want to do first?”

Tom’s perception and understanding tone floored her. How could he know that? And why would he even bother to care? Before she could respond, they approached the Red Cross truck. Seconds later, Tom held her keys in his hand.

“I’ll drive,” he announced. His tone left no room for discussion. “Mine’s the black Avalanche over there.” He pointed to the left, down the street a bit and motioned for her to join him.

“Thanks, but no,” Pam insisted, shaking her head. “I’ll be fine.” In her opinion, she’d already spent quite enough time with Thomas Jarrod for one trip. For a lifetime, in fact. The further they stayed away from one another, the better. Besides, she needed to see the hospital alone. To get a feel for the place before being thrust into tomorrow’s grand tour and the dozens of introductions and meetings that were sure to follow.

“What time did you get up this morning?” Tom questioned over his shoulder.

Pam followed, trying to catch up. He still kept her keys!

“Early.” She stifled a yawn. “The flight from Boston left at six, but…”

He’d reached his truck and now waited for her. “So, you’re tired, hungry, it’s dark, and you haven’t driven these country roads for what? Fourteen years?”

Approaching him, she nodded. She started to say she felt fine, but he cut her off.

“And now you’re going to find the hospital all by yourself?” He gave her a challenging grin. “That makes total sense. Why accept a ride from someone who knows exactly where the place is, and who can then get you some good food, and after you eat, take you to your hotel? I guess that’s just too easy. I understand completely.”

Pam scratched an itch on her nose and frowned. Of course he made sense.

Which annoyed her to no end.

So he thinks he’s got everything figured out, hmm? She released a deep breath. Well, that’s just great.

“I know what your problem is.”

“What problem?” Pam retorted, thrown off balance again. His grin was entirely too annoying.

“It’s my boots.”

Totally confused, she looked at his feet, barely visible in the dark night. “What about them?”

“It’s the cow poop stuck to them. I was out in the fields when the alarm came in. I didn’t get a chance to change.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Pam automatically countered. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t hold back a smile. “I just thought…”

“Oh. I see.” Tom lowered his voice to a seductive tone. “You don’t want to be alone with me. And them.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

He nodded. “That’s right. You remember what happened the last time we were together. Steamy truck windows, cumbersome buttons and zippers, my work boots making us both gag. You’re afraid all those feelings will come rushing back and you wouldn’t be able to keep your hands off me.”

Pam tried to stifle her laughter. Of course none of that really happened. It was just like all those years ago when he’d tease her nonstop about anything and everything. When her innocent heart ached to be noticed by him. As a woman. Not just the teenage girl he drove back and forth to school each day along with twenty other kids on the bus.

It hadn’t mattered to her that Tom was seven years older. She liked the idea that he was her bus driver and the coach of the high school football team. He also volunteered for the town’s rescue services and tended his family’s huge dairy farm. Yes, they did come from two different worlds, but she’d been hooked the moment he gave her that first smile.

“The poor little rich girl,” he’d said and then added in an exaggerated New England accent, “from Boston forced to live amongst us ignorant country folk.”

But Thomas Jarrod, Pam suspected, was neither poor nor ignorant. And with each passing day, her suspicions proved accurate.

“Well?” he insisted. “What do you say?”

Pam blinked back to the present. Sure she could take a joke. She could even dish one out, but he was always so quick. “Wait! I’m out of practice,” she insisted. “Give me a second!”

Again, she saw that twinkling glint in his eyes. In the moon’s light, she noticed that the smile lines around his mouth and eyes had deepened over the years. And yes, his blond hair looked a bit thin on top, now that she could see it. Or maybe it was just flattened by his baseball hat. Who cared? His intense gaze turned her insides to jelly when he looked at her. He was still such a flirt! So determined to get her tongue tied. Just like the old days.

On impulse, Pam glanced down at Tom’s left hand. No wedding ring. But that meant…

She corrected herself. That didn’t mean anything. Lots of married men didn’t wear a ring. And why should it matter? That was a long time ago. Afterward, they each went their separate ways. And lived their separate lives.

“Come on,” he urged. “It’s about a twenty-minute drive. Afterward, we can get a quick bite to eat. I know a really great place that will still be open. And I’ll give you a five-cent tour of the area on the way. There’ve been a lot of changes around here since you left. You’ll hardly recognize the place.”

Pam stifled another yawn. It was late. She felt grimy, exhausted and hungry. Her stomach grumbled. Maybe she should wait until tomorrow to see the hospital. A bath and hamburger sounded fine for now.

“Ready?”

She started to decline again when he added, “If we hurry, you should get to meet Dr. Everett. She took the day off but came in to help out in the ER when she heard about the explosion. I know she was pleased to hear you were at the scene.”

What? Pam groaned. That’s great. It was Marlene Everett’s invite that had convinced her to make this short trip. Her admiration and respect for the woman knew no boundaries. Though women now commonly entered the medical profession, Marlene was one of the first to forge her way into emergency medicine. Thanks to her never-ending achievements and efforts, the road was now much easier for them.

Pam considered her physical appearance and sighed. “Thanks, Tom. I really appreciate the offer. But look at me. I’m a wreck. And first impressions count. I don’t want her seeing me like this.”

Before she could step back, he placed his knuckles under her chin, tilting her gaze to him. “You look fine. Besides it will give her a preview of what you’ll look like if you take the job and spend all day and night up to your elbows in blood and guts.”

Ignoring his closeness and the way it made her tingle, Pam arched him an eyebrow. “I hope you know you’re painting a horrific picture.”

Not to be deterred, he quickly added, “And you could wash up in the doctors’ lounge. I’ll even bring in your suitcase so you can change into something a little less…sooty.”

Again, Pam could only stare at him. Once more he surprised her. She was the one accustomed to figuring everything out. Making suggestions. Finding solutions. Why would he even care?

“Sound okay?”

Pam felt a smile form before she could bite it back. He looked so… eager. And fun to be around. It had been a long time since she had felt that

way about someone. Usually, she was too busy spending every waking moment making life-or-death decisions in one of Boston's busiest emergency departments.

"It sounds like you've thought of everything."

Tom beamed.

Laughing now, and admittedly charmed by his efforts, she still shook her head. It just wouldn't be right. And why was he being so insistent? What would his wife think?

She felt his hands on her shoulders. She stopped laughing and then realized he did too. Suddenly nervous, she looked down at the tips of her shoes.

"Pam?"

His voice was low, and contrary to his previous tone, he sounded uncertain. Even tense.

She raised her chin and found him studying her.

His expression had changed. Now he looked serious. And determined to say something. But what? She realized that she was holding her breath, curious but also worried about his next words.

For a moment, they stared at each other. Then he spoke. "In case you're wondering, Susan and I divorced almost five years ago."

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Chapter Four

Without warning, Pam felt herself being thrust back into a time warp. The first time they'd sat side by side like this in his truck, making idle chit-chat and driving along these dark roads, was on their first date. She recalled the evening: March 18, 1994. Funny how she still remembered. She felt herself smile. He didn't reach for her hand until their fourth date.

"I kept seeing your father chasing me around your yard carrying his shotgun," Tom told her later. They laughed about it at the time, knowing he was probably right.

Pam felt so head-over-heels about him back then. The sun rose and set over their time together. And why not? Didn't she finally deserve some fun? At least for a little while?

Staying in the top five percent of her high school class took a lot of work on her part. Even this little town had some very smart kids. In September, she would enter Harvard's pre-med program. That promised to be at least a thousand times more grueling. Which meant that these last few months in Middleton would be her first and only time to ease up on her self-imposed pressure to make it into medical school.

"Stay away from Thomas Jarrod," her friend Megan had warned. "He's the cutest, baddest bad boy and heartbreaker in town. And proud of it to boot!"

But the advice came too late. Pam was already hooked. She'd been hooked on him since moving to Middleton with her family two years earlier. And like most young girls in that frame of mind, she had fallen hard and fast.

Though maybe not male-model handsome, Tom's quick smile and that bright glimmer in his sky blue eyes branded her heart. And his merciless teasing and flirting only served to fan the fire.

During those first two years, every time she'd convinced herself that she was just one of his many female fans, he'd do something to make her feel singled out. Special. But he'd never asked her to go on a date. Or even hinted at one.

Then the evening after her eighteenth birthday, the tall, lean farmer, his skin sun-kissed from working outdoors, appeared on her doorstep. After giving her a wink, he asked to see her father.

Too stunned to speak, Pam ushered Tom inside the house and pointed to the couch. A minute later, she led him to her father's home office. There, thrilled, excited, and slightly sick to her stomach, she listened to Tom introducing himself and asking her father for permission to take her out for a pizza and a movie. Their romance lasted twelve wonderful weeks.

Then recalling the terrible events that followed, Pam felt the happy memory fade. Brushing them aside, she fought the urge to look at Tom. During this trip, she had really hoped to avoid seeing him or anyone else she knew back then. The medical center sat on the outskirts of town, at least fifteen miles or so from his farm. She'd planned to spend her time there and at the hotel exclusively. The factory explosion changed that. But why were they thrown together like this? Nothing good could ever come of it.

"I'm glad you're here."

Startled from her thoughts, Pam turned to Tom. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

He laughed. But to her it sounded forced. Anxious almost. This was interesting. It was also interesting that he was no longer married. But she refused to ask any questions. It was none of her business and, truthfully, she really didn't want to know. Nor did he offer an explanation.

"I said I'm glad you're here. It's good to see you."

Quickly, she nodded. "Oh, yeah. It's good to see you." Listening to her own voice, she realized she felt uneasy too. Suddenly, this did not seem like such a good idea. The only reason she'd accepted Tom's offer was because he threw her off kilter with his statement about his marriage. Now she fretted over who else knew she was back in town. And whether anyone at the hospital would recognize her.

None of it really mattered, she told herself. It wasn't like she'd intended to take the job and move back here. Still, she hated the sense of unease looming over her. Maybe it was because she left so many loose ends back here. Yeah, but that was only part of it. In truth, she was a coward. People with good memories would recognize her name. After all, it took up most of the front page of the newspaper for more than a week. Even worse, the events that led to those articles affected some people's lives permanently. Hers included. Did she fear what they might say? You betcha. Could they be right? Double betcha. And that had fueled her determination to avoid them, along with her own feelings on the matter, for more than a decade.

Please Lord, make this a fast trip, she prayed. Just in and out. I'll tour the medical center, convince myself that I'm not missing anything by taking the job in Chicago, thank Dr. Everett for her offer, and go. Over and done.

"There it is," Tom announced, pointing to a cluster of brightly lit buildings.

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Chapter Five

Tom kept both eyes glued on the road leading to the medical center.

“It’s larger than I thought,” Pam said, interrupting his troubled thoughts.

“Excuse me?”

“The medical center. It’s huge.”

Keep on track, Tom told himself. That’s why she’s here. Remember? The job at the hospital?

“Yeah, it is.” He turned onto the road leading to the ten-story, u-shaped complex. Six smaller structures strategically surrounded the main building on the well manicured, fifty-acre campus. Taking a risk, he added, “I bet you expected a rusty old trailer with someone resembling Granny from the Beverly Hillbillies meeting us at the door.”

“Of course not. It’s just that…”

“You don’t need to explain.” Tom took a spot in the emergency department’s parking lot and cut the engine. Jumping out of the truck, he said. “You can’t help being a snob. It’s just part of that blue blood running through your veins.”

Pleased with that jab, he ran around to open Pam’s door, but she beat him to it.

Flashing him a playful grin, she followed the red and white signs leading to the entrance. “I’m going to ignore that statement,” she called out over her shoulder. “It’s obviously derived from your inferiority complex.”

In two quick moves, Tom propelled her off the ground and flung her over his shoulder. “I’ve always wanted to do this.”

“Good!” she exclaimed, beating her fists into his back. “I’m thrilled for you. Now put me down!”

“Not quite yet. I’ve got to say, although the evening hasn’t turned out exactly like I planned, it’s getting better every minute.” He headed toward the automatic, double doors.

“Oh no!” Pam cried out. “Tom! Please! Stop! What are people going to think when I enter the place rear-end first?”

Feeling more like himself, he laughed louder. “Let’s go in and find out.”

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“Who’s this?” Pam heard a new voice ask. Horrified, she gave up the fight.

“Meet your new doctor!” Tom announced. He carried her into an office and deposited her in a comfortable, green velvet chair. “Dr. Marlene Everett, formerly of Chicago and now of Middletown, please meet Dr. Pamela Harrington of Boston.”

Still filthy and disheveled, Pam stood and shook the famous doctor’s hand. Fortunately, the woman appeared to have a good sense of humor.

“Tom told me you might be hesitant to come here,” Marlene said, laughing. “But I didn’t think he’d have to actually carry you in!”

Everyone chuckled while Pam shot arrows with her eyes in Tom’s direction. “Believe me,” she replied dryly. “It wasn’t my idea.” At the same time, she felt an anxious flutter in her stomach. What else did he tell her?

After a few minutes of exchanging pleasantries and discussing the factory explosion, Marlene turned to Pam, “Would you like to meet some of the staff?”

Pam followed the petite brunette through a set of double doors. They led to a busy nursing station and a huge, square-shaped hallway that contained several treatment rooms. Passing by, she noted a patient in each one.

While Marlene made the introductions and Pam responded, she realized that Tom kept his distance but maintained a gaze locked on her. In spite of her efforts to remain calm, that worried flutter turned into a full fledged tumble.

“As you can see,” Marlene continued, drawing Pam back and pointing to various areas of the department, “We’re busy, but everything’s under control after today’s little explosion. And I must say, your timing was impeccable. We really appreciated your help.”

Pam nodded. “Of course. And I’m so impressed at how quickly the response teams reacted.”

“You can thank Tom for that. Right, Chief?”

“Right, Doc,” he answered, then winked at Pam.

Confused, Pam crinkled her forehead. Did she miss something? Marlene must have noticed because she said, “In case Tom didn’t mention it, the response teams are tied directly to this hospital, under his command. He also helped design this place and is a member of the board of directors.”

Pam’s attention darted back to Tom. Why was she surprised? The job suited him perfectly. “That’s a huge responsibility,” she said finally. “And from what I saw today, you’ve done a fantastic job.”

The compliment sounded flat, but she meant it sincerely. They'd both come so far since the last time they saw each other. And though she thought of him from time to time, it never occurred to her that they could be standing here like this, faced with the potential of working together.

Tom gave her a rare, quiet smile, as if he appreciated her opinion. "Thanks."

"I know it's late," Marlene said, pushing a dark lock away from her face. "And I'm sure you're exhausted, but since you're here, how about seeing the rest of the place?"

Pam looked to Tom. "Do you mind?" Now, feeling so totally impressed with everything, she no longer felt tired or cared about her appearance. The hospital seemed to possess all she could hope for, and then so much more.

"Of course not," he encouraged. "Take your time. That's why we're here."

He's being awfully nice, she noted. And he hadn't uttered a single wisecrack in at least five minutes. How unusual. She'd think about that later. For now, she turned to Marlene. "Thank you. I'd like that."

Walking out of the ED, they headed toward an intensive care unit. "Didn't the two of you work for the ambulance company years ago?" Marlene asked.

Pam heard Tom utter a groan. Flashing him a blinding smile, she shook her head. "No. I volunteered at Hopewell's company. One town over. That made us rivals, so to speak."

"Really? But didn't you live in Middleton?"

"Yes, she did," Tom quickly chimed in.

Amused, Pam tossed him a look that asked, "Will you tell her, or should I?"

"I acted a dufus back then," he shot back, trying to make light of the situation.

Pam laughed. "I think that's a fairly accurate description."

"A dufus?" Marlene repeated, as they entered another wing of the hospital.

Pam gave her a firm nod. "Definitely a dufus."

"With good reason," Tom weakly defended.

Pam arched her eyebrow. "I'm glad you think so. If I remember right, I'd been volunteering as a candy striper at a Boston hospital since turning

fourteen. At sixteen, I joined a rescue company. A few months later my father's job transferred us here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Tom stifled a yawn. "How about those Phillies? I heard they were heading to the World Series this season."

"Oh no," Marlene scolded. "You're not changing the subject. I want to hear the rest of the story. From Pam!"

"Thank you." Pam bowed. "Tom hired all the rescue volunteers at that time. And he told me I was a liability."

Marlene shot Tom a teasing frown. "You turned her down?"

Sheepishly, he shrugged. "Like I said, I was a dufus."

"Yeah. He told me I was too young. So he rejected me."

"And you went to the competition?" Marlene asked Pam.

Tom answered first. "She sure did. And she became a major pain in my butt every time both Middleton and Hopewell worked a scene." He threw her an exaggerated scowl. "And that wasn't the half of it. Imagine these county picnics and little contests that the companies held against each other every couple of months. We did it for fun. Yeah. Right. Pam showed up at every one of them looking for blood. And most times, she got it!"

"Hell knows no fury like a woman scorned," Marlene quoted, draping an arm around both of them. "Well, I'm glad to see there's a good, healthy rapport between the two of you. That's the kind of team cooperation we need around here to make this medical center a success. Getting this place built, up and running was the easy part. Now for the real test: Living up to the reason why we're here."

Several minutes later, after showing Pam numerous treatment units and sections, Marlene led them to one of the hospital's general patient wings.

"The service area is large," Pam commented, passing the numerous rooms.

Marlene nodded. "We're an acute treatment facility for five counties. After patients are stabilized and begin recuperating here, they are transported back to their community rehab hospitals. That way we don't put those places out of business and the patients are close to their family and friends."

"How many of tonight's folks were admitted?" Tom asked.

"About forty in all," she said. "At least twenty are serious. The others suffered mainly from minor smoke inhalation." She paused in the doorway of a patient's room. "Here's one of them now. Good evening, Mr. Maloney."

The elderly man turned his attention from the television and gave them a wave. “Hi, Doc.”

“How are you feeling?” Marlene asked, finding his pulse. Then she reached for his chart.

“Much better, thanks.”

His raspy voice confirmed that he had inhaled a lot of smoke. Pam noted the oxygen cart set up next to the bed.

“Who you got there?” he asked, reaching for his glasses. “Oh, Thomas. Good to see you. Your guys drive a mean ambulance. And is this the little lady who helped me out back there?”

“Sure is,” Tom agreed. “This is Dr. Harrington.”

Nodding to Pam, Mr. Maloney gave Tom a knowing wink. “Another beautiful woman doctor? Heck, it almost makes it worth getting sick.”

“I heard that,” a short, graying woman interjected. She walked into the room wearing a feisty grin and carrying a small overnight suitcase.

“Here. Let me help you with that.” Tom took the bag and placed it on the bureau. After a minute or so, he and Pam followed the doctor out of the room.

“I understand the lure of the big city,” Marlene told Pam. “Believe me. And Chicago General would be lucky to have you. You would do well there. But I don’t think you’ll be disappointed if you decide to come here instead. During these next few days, take a good look around. Ask questions. Talk to everyone you meet. I believe you’ll be pleasantly surprised at what you find.”

“Thank you,” Pam answered sincerely. “It’s a beautiful facility.”

“Different from what you expected?”

Smiling, she flashed a look at Tom. “I really wasn’t sure what to expect.”

“That’s fair. I remember feeling the same way. I’m glad you decided to make the trip.” She brought them to an elevator. “Let’s go back to my office. I’ve got some paperwork for you to look over: the job description, the hospital’s policies and mission statement, salary and benefits packages. That sort of thing. Nothing’s cast in stone. Feel free to talk to me about it tomorrow and give me your input.”

Tom pulled her close and whispered, “That means you’ve got an open ticket. We’ll do whatever it takes.”

His statement took a second to sink in. Then Pam coughed. “That’s good to know.”

A few minutes later, back in her office, Marlene gave Pam a folder and extended her hand and a warm smile. “I’m glad we got a chance to meet before all the formalities begin tomorrow. Please think about what I said. We may be out here in the middle of nowhere, but I can promise you it’s never dull.” She then looked to Tom. “When you recommended Pam, you told the hiring committee that she would fit in perfectly.” Marlene turned her attention back to Pam. “He was right.”

Pam spun around to face him. “You recommended me?”

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Six

“You didn’t know?” Amused, Marlene’s eyes sparkled.

Pam could only stare at her. Then at Tom. Leaning against the wall, his arms crossed, he gave her a look that said, “Of course. What did you expect?”

The doctor smiled at Pam’s obvious surprise. “Do you want to hear the story?”

“Another time,” Tom interrupted, making a reach for Pam’s arm. “It’s getting late.”

“Oh, no. Now’s fine,” she assured him. “Please go on, Marlene. I’m very curious about how this happened.”

Much to Pam’s delight, and that of the other doctor, Tom groaned again.

“As a member of the board,” Marlene began. “Thomas here votes on all hired personnel. Last month, after we decided to hire another staff ED doctor, I mentioned your name. I also mentioned another candidate Chicago General intended to hire. We wanted someone exceptional here and I knew both of your files. When Tom heard your name, he let out this walloping hoot of laughter and insisted we extend you an invitation.”

“Hm. I see.” How totally strange, Pam thought.

Tom jingled his keys. “And here you are. So can we go now? I’m starved.”

Pam looked to Marlene. The woman’s knowing-smile made her giggle. “Sure.”

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Fulfilling his promise, Tom had retrieved Pam’s luggage from the SUV before heading to the medical center. Now he brought it to her in the doctor’s lounge. Ten minutes after leaving Dr. Everett, Pam emerged, wearing navy slacks and a white linen blouse.

“Gee, it’s amazing what a little soap, water and hair spray can do,” she murmured, carrying a garment bag and wheeling a small suitcase behind her. Suddenly self-conscious, she looked up and found Tom openly admiring her from across the hall. He too had changed clothes and looked incredibly handsome. More refined than she remembered. His tanned face and arms contrasted nicely with the white polo shirt tucked into black chinos.

“You look great,” he complimented, taking the garment bag. “Ready to go?”

Heading toward his truck, Pam marveled at the evening’s unusual events. Once on the road, the uneasiness that plagued them during the ride to the medical center now disappeared. Effortlessly, they talked about the facility and the people she had met. Then Tom asked, “Does any of this look familiar?”

Slowly, he drove by the brightly lit shops and restaurants that lined both sides of a busy street. Pam peered out of the passenger side window, amazed at what she saw. Though almost eleven o’clock, a fair number of people strolled along the sidewalk, chatting and window shopping, or sat on benches, munching ice cream cones.

“Yes and no. We’re on Center Street, right?”

“That’s right. But not like you remember it.”

Pam nodded. “It feels a bit like the Twilight Zone. I recognize some of the buildings. There’s the bank, and Sonny’s gas station, but everything else looks so different. Including all these people. The last I remember, this place closed down tight by six every night.”

“And it didn’t exactly boom any time before then either,” Tom reminded her.

“That’s for sure.”

“Let’s stop here.” He pointed toward the right.

Pam followed and found a number of tables set up on a large verandah in front of a restaurant. She counted over a dozen people lingering over deserts and drinks, enjoying the evening’s Indian summer breeze. The clatter of silverware and glass echoed through the air, mingling with festive chatter and delicious aromas.

Pam inhaled. “Something smells wonderful.”

“It is,” he assured her, backing into a parking spot.

She hesitated, marveling at the day’s unpredictable twists. So much for that fast food she’d planned to pick up on the way to the hotel.

Tom opened her door and took her hand. “At last we’ve arrived. Along with today’s cow poop, I smell like smoke from the fire. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Don’t be silly,” she replied, easing out of the truck.

Years ago, she remembered his amazement at how impressed she was with his family’s business. Coming from a large city, she had really never

given any thought to the fact that some people earned their living providing food for the rest of the world.

“A close buddy owns half of this place,” Tom whispered, guiding her to the restaurant’s entrance.

Noting her surroundings, Pam realized she felt as if they were on a date. That’s stupid, she told herself. She’d gone to lots of restaurants with lots of men. Most were friends or business associates, both single and married. And she and Tom had a history. Bleak, but still. It would not be unusual for two people who hadn’t seen each other for a while to get together, briefly. Right?

An image of Tom’s supposed ex-wife flashed in Pam’s mind. Quickly, she dismissed it, along with all the negativity it conjured up. Instead, she focused on Tom, propelling her through the crowd. He stopped here and there, returning greetings and answering inquiries about the explosion.

With Tom’s hand guiding her, Pam smiled politely, intentionally avoiding eye contact. Would anyone recognize her? Suddenly being there, out in public with Tom, didn’t seem like such a good idea. The base of her neck began to tingle with alarm again. Blood rushed to her temples, making them pulse.

Almost frantic, Pam searched the walls for a back exit. Get me out of here, God, she prayed. Please!

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Seven

At that moment, Tom squeezed her hand. “Just up the stairs.”

Determined to stop her rising sense of panic, Pam followed gratefully. Once at the top, he led her to a dimly lit balcony and closed the door. To her relief, much of the clatter evaporated. Immediately, she noticed one candlelit table. It overlooked the street and contained two place settings.

Tom pulled out a chair for her. “You look like something’s on your mind.”

Feeling a little better, Pam shook her head and smiled. “No. Just confirming that you’re still a popular guy.”

“He should be,” a large burly man interjected, appearing out of nowhere. “He owns half the joint.”

Something about the voice jolted Pam’s memory.

“Eddie?” She looked to Tom, then back to the man she knew to be Tom’s best friend all those years ago. And a really nice guy.

“None other,” he grinned, offering her a friendly hug. “Welcome back, Doc. It’s good to see you.”

“He’s the other owner,” Tom added.

Out of the corner of her eye, Pam noticed Tom make a motion toward what appeared to be a kitchen. An instant later, a waiter carried over a cheese and fruit platter. He set it in the middle of their table.

“The two of you? This place?” Impressed, Pam nodded approvingly. “You’ve done a great job. It’s beautiful.” And it was. Pam recalled the building, formerly called the Middleton House Inn. Built back in the late eighteen hundreds, at one time it had included a fancy restaurant and saloon along with rooms for rent upstairs. At the time Pam moved to Middleton, it still hosted a semi-upscale restaurant, but it had desperately needed refurbishing and a new chef. She and the high school kids who worked there expected it to close at any second.

From the looks of it now, Tom and Eddie must have gutted the place with the intent of restoring much of its earlier charm. Gleaming mahogany planks had replaced worn carpets. And ornate stained woodwork replaced chipped paint. The new wallpaper looked like silk tapestries, alive with blues and reds and greens, accented with antique brass lamps and fixtures. “This must have taken a ton of work!” she marveled.

Both men whistled and rolled their eyes. “It did!”

Then Eddie headed for the stairs. “And it’s packed. So since it’s my night to man the place, I’ve got to go. I’ll pop up again later.”

“Thanks, Ed,” Tom said, then looked to Pam. “So what do you think?”

The question sounded simple enough, but his close proximity, a mere few feet across the table, eyes intent upon her, sent Pam’s senses wheeling. We are not on a date, she reminded herself again. It can’t be. To her relief, she saw the waiter approach. She looked at Tom. “Should we order?”

Tom arched a suspicious eyebrow. To his credit, he held off further questions until they were again alone. Passing her the bread basket, he asked, “So?”

Taking her time, Pam selected a piece of banana nut bread. “I think that’s a loaded question.”

Tom’s burst of laughter instantly lightened the mood. “You got that right. So what’s the answer?”

“Answer to what?”

“To everything.”

Tossing him an exasperated smile, she joined him in sampling the various types of cheeses and crackers. “I don’t know. I just got here.”

“Oh yes you do. I can tell.”

Sighing, Pam placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her folded hands. Giving him her full attention, she shook her head. “Actually, I really don’t know. From what little I saw tonight, the medical center and staff seem phenomenal. And, unless you really did stage that little explosion for my benefit, which I seriously doubt, your rescue operations are tops. Good response times, good organization. You should be very proud of the teams. They knew exactly what they were doing.”

Tom leaned back and slapped the table with the palm of his hand. “Excellent! Then it’s settled. You’ll take the job and move back here.”

Unable to contain her curiosity any longer, Pam took the plunge. “What is it to you? Do you get a finder’s fee or something? In fact, though I don’t want to seem like I’m kicking a gift horse in the mouth, what made you consider recommending me for the job?”

Before Tom could answer, the waiter appeared with their steaks. Tom waited several seconds before responding. When he did, both his expression and his tone turned serious.

“I want you to know that a lot has changed around here. The town’s development and the new medical center are only part of it.”

Pam fingered the stem of her water glass. “I can see that,” she answered quietly. “You’ve done very well for yourself.”

Tom shrugged. “Not too bad for a country bumpkin. And I can say the same for you, Dr. Harrington. But that’s not all I’m referring to.”

Pam’s eyes dropped to the candle’s flame. Her stomach followed, sending her toward the downward slope of a huge roller coaster, at record-breaking speed. She didn’t know what to say. Nor did she feel comfortable with the road this conversation was taking. Usually so carefree, so cavalier, with his I do as I please attitude, she now heard an undercurrent of something else in Tom’s voice. What it was, she wasn’t sure. He seemed so intense. More so than she’d ever known him to be.

“I have two sons,” he told her, breaking the silence. “A.J., who will be fourteen in a few months, and Mark who’s nine.”

Pam noticed his expression soften slightly at the mention of his children. But not as much as she expected. She repeated the eldest son’s name to herself. Fate’s twists and turns were so ironic, she mused. Fourteen years ago, her life and Tom’s had been dramatically altered by that innocent child’s very existence. For an instant, a picture of what could have been flashed before her eyes. She blinked it away.

She had no right to indulge in such fantasies. Heck, she was a kid back then. So was Tom, for that matter. Neither one of them had expected their little spring-summer romance to blossom into something more.

“I wrote you.”

Slowly, Pam nodded. “Yes. You did.” She turned to look out over the street.

“And called.”

She didn’t hear any accusation in his voice. But she would have understood if there were. She neither wrote back nor returned any of his calls. She saw no point.

Eventually, she summoned the courage to meet his serious gaze.

“I wasn’t sure you’d agree to take the trip down here.”

She gave him a guilty smile. “Me either. Not until I stepped foot on the plane. And then I still debated turning around. Even during that long drive from the airport.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. And Marlene is right.”

“About what?”

“You’re perfect for the job. I thought a lot about you over the years. When Marlene mentioned your name and I read through your resume and file, I felt really happy for you. Every goal you set, from the time you were a sixteen-year-old, you accomplished.”

It warmed Pam to hear his compliment. At the same time, she wanted to disappear. She’d acted like such a lovesick puppy over him back then. She hoped he didn’t remember some of the crazy things she’d done to get his attention.

Let’s close that door, she told herself. Back to the present. “Thank you for making the suggestion. The whole situation came as quite a shock at first. Chicago General offered me a job just minutes before I learned that Marlene left there to become the director here.”

“You’re welcome, but like she told you, she planned to call you anyway. Believe me, you’re that good.”

Pam felt her cheeks burn. She speared a mushroom from the sauce covering her filet mignon. On paper, he was right. She’d earned the highest credentials available at this level of her profession. Still working on the threshold of life and death on a daily basis, there were always those nagging doubts. If only she had done this procedure. Maybe she should have done that one instead. She constantly questioned herself. Constantly wrestled with feelings of inadequacy.

God gave her a gift. She’d realized that years ago. Yet, at times it felt more like a curse. There was still so much she didn’t know. So much that was out of her reach. Out of her control. How could she be sure, really sure, when she lost a patient, whether it was God’s will or her own ineptness that caused that straight line on the heart monitor?

“Do you think you’re at all interested in the job?”

Pam wiped cracker crumbs from her mouth with the cloth napkin and settled back in the chair. “I haven’t received a formal offer yet.”

“Fair enough. You haven’t opened the folder Marlene gave you. So presume it’s offered. Will you take it?”

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Eight

No, Pam's inner voice responded. Yet she found her mouth glued shut.

Tom's mouth formed a straight line. "Well, at least you didn't say no. Just tell me this?"

"Shoot."

"Are you hesitating because of me?"

Pam nearly gagged. Of course it's because of you, she almost blurted out. Then corrected herself. No, it wasn't entirely his fault. But she still marveled at the bottomless pit of the male ego. Did he really think she would turn down a fantastic professional opportunity because of a little crush gone bad when she was a teenager? If so, he'd be right, of course. At least partly. But she'd never admit it aloud.

She bit back the sarcasm and the impulse to roll her eyes. No. Other reasons made her want to turn down the offer. And though Tom hadn't mentioned them, she expected him to know what they were.

"I thought we made a really good couple back then," he continued when she didn't answer. "Was I right?"

That statement took Pam by surprise. Yes, she did too. At the time. But only until she found out about the extent of his relationship with Susan Murphy. At that instant, Pam's entire fantasy blew up in her face.

With that memory in mind, Pam's thoughts rewound back to that one fate-filled night. She was at a cast party with a bunch of students from the high school. They had just finished the opening night of their senior class play. Hanging out in a cast member's basement, they rehashed their performances and reminisced about their antics at Middleton High.

Moving there during her sophomore year had been a difficult adjustment. While living in Boston, Pam rode with the ambulance squad, volunteered in Boston General Hospital's emergency room and took science classes at one of the colleges as part of a special program. Middleton had no such program. Nor did it have public transportation to get her to the area hospital to volunteer. For her, it was a very lonely time, even when she joined Hopewell's rescue team. Then she met Megan Fitzpatrick.

Originally from Philadelphia, Megan had moved to Middleton in junior high. Like Pam, her father had been transferred there. Quickly, they became great friends and together they muddled through.

In June of her senior year, with graduation swiftly approaching, Pam's one hundred class members seemed to join together. Most of the cliques had dissolved and overall, they became a unified group.

A handful of the class knew Pam and Tom were dating. It was okay with them. To their knowledge, Tom had never dated a student before, so it wasn't as if it was a yearly pattern for him. And he'd stopped working for the high school in order to avoid a scandal or the appearance of impropriety.

A lot of the girls dated older boys. And many boys in her class dated younger girls. Michael Presley was one of them. His girlfriend, Jennifer Murphy, was a sophomore. She was also Susan Murphy's younger sister.

Pam recalled checking the clock on the wall. Twenty after midnight. She still hadn't heard from Tom. She had expected him to attend the play that evening. When he didn't, she presumed he got called out on ambulance duty. She tried to ignore the uneasiness brewing in her stomach. Then she overhead Jennifer, who had recently arrived at the party.

"My sister is pregnant."

It came out like a declaration. Pam turned to the young girl and found her dark eyes, defiant, staring at her. "And Tom Jarrod is the father. They're getting married at the end of this month."

Instantly, everything stopped. The room became silent. Everyone's eyes fell on Pam. A few snickers followed. Megan grabbed her hand and urged her up the stairs and out of the house.

"Don't think about it," she told Pam. "Jennifer is a horrible little girl. Her sister is even worse. Let's go home and call Tom. I know I said he was bad news, but once you two started dating and I got to know him, I sort of changed my mind. It seems like he really grew up. He really likes you. I can't believe he would two-time you with …with Susan Murphy." She scrunched up her nose. "How icky!"

Though Pam wanted to agree, she also knew Tom and Susan had dated earlier in the year. Susan was beautiful, rich and close to Tom's age. Whether she was still a virgin didn't matter. She certainly had more experience with men than Pam. Though Tom never pressured her sexually, she knew enough to understand he had desires she wasn't ready to satisfy. Adding that to Jennifer's statement and Tom's unexpected absence filled Pam with a sense of dread. The rest of the night and the several months afterward whizzed by in a blur.

Pam didn’t get a chance to hear the whole story from Tom. Intervening incidents prevented that. Instead, her parents confirmed the marriage a few months after it took place.

“Pam?”

She blinked, startled to find Tom sitting across from her. Absolutely amazing. “Do you have any pictures of your boys?” she asked, determined to switch her thoughts to more pleasant topics.

Tom kept his eyes on her while retrieving his wallet from his back pocket. “Sure. But you didn’t answer my question.”

Pam really didn’t feel like rehashing the past, but if he did… She released a low exhale. “Of course I think we made a good couple. But I was so young. And I had such a big crush on you. I cringe now, looking back.”

Handing her a photograph, Tom countered, “Think about the razzing I took about you. You were jail bait all the way. All my friends said so. And a preppy high school senior going to Harvard in the fall. They took bets about you leaving me in the dust in no time flat.”

Pam studied the boys’ faces. “They look like great kids.” And she sincerely meant it. While A.J. favored his mother’s features, Mark looked like the spitting image of Tom.

“Oh they are,” Tom agreed, replacing the picture. “Would you?”

Pam frowned. “Would I what?”

He gave her an exasperated glare. “Have left me in the dust in no time flat?”

“Certainly not,” she insisted, noting again the controlled way in which Tom handled the topic of his children.

Why? she wondered. Should she ask? No, she decided.

First of all, it was another topic that was none of her business. Second, she knew him well enough to understand that if he wanted to talk about them, he would. Going along with his choice of topic, she shook her head.

“No. I think you would have dumped me first. You were ready to start your life. I needed at least eight more years of school, then a hospital residency. Maybe it was self-preservation, but I used to tell myself that the long-distance relationship wouldn’t have worked out anyway. Sure we’d try, but eventually we’d fizzle out.”

“That’s what you really thought?”

Oh, dear. He really seemed miffed. But why? No doubt he knew statistics proved she was right. And besides, he’s the one who screwed up.

Then she realized she was slightly pleased at his reaction. In a way, it was flattering. Unexpectedly, a giggle escaped her.

“Who cares what she thought back then?” Eddie bellowed. He appeared out of nowhere and filled their water glasses. “Or what you thought, Tommy Boy. What matters is now. You’re both here, together. Finally. So don’t blow it.” Then he added, “Of course, that’s presuming Pam isn’t married. Or hooked up with anybody serious.” He looked at her. “Are you?”

Tom released an exaggerated cough. “Let’s not beat around the bush now, Eddie. Feel free to say whatever’s on your mind.”

“Just helping out, Buddy.” Eddie clamped a large, powerful hand on Tom’s shoulder. “It took you two more than a decade to get this far. I’m just trying to move things long.”

Dismayed, Pam looked to Tom, then Eddie, then back to Tom. Romance was absolutely the last thing on her mind when she’d reluctantly decided to make this trip. Is that what they were hinting at?

“Well are you?” Eddie repeated.

“What?”

“Married?” both men answered in unison.

“Or dating,” Tom added.

“She’s not wearing a ring.” Eddie offered.

Tom shook his head. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“No,” Pam confirmed, laughing. “I’m not married, but I’d like to get a dog. Living in the city and working so much at the hospital, it didn’t seem fair to keep one locked up all the time. Here? Who knows?”

As the words flew from her mouth, she realized how ridiculous she sounded. Sure, it was true. She loved animals. But she didn’t intend to move to Middleton just to have one!

Suddenly, Pam found herself needing to do something with her hands. Gathering up the plates, she said, “Point me to the kitchen.”

Instantly, Tom sprang to his feet and tried to take them from her. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. And believe me. I’m one of the least domesticated people you’ll ever meet. But this is your place. Right? And we’re…” She searched for the right word. “Friends. Right?”

Relenting, he smiled and picked up the remaining dishes. “Right.”

“Has Tom told you about tomorrow?” Eddie asked Pam, leading her into the kitchen.

Tom shook his head. “Haven’t had a chance yet.”

“He’s invited me and my wife over to his place for dinner in your honor. Rebecca makes great desserts. She’s looking forward to meeting you.”

“I could pick you up at around six,” Tom told her. “After you finish at the hospital.”

Pam felt the weight of his cool, blue eyes, watching her intently. For a second, she experienced a wave of déjà vu. He wore that same expression that night when he asked her father’s permission to take her out.

She nodded to him, then Eddie. “It sounds like fun. I’ll look forward to it.” Saying the words, she realized she meant it. What’s happening here? she wondered. Why does it feel so comfortable? And why is Tom here? With me? Sure, she still found him attractive. More than attractive. But everything was so different now. Why go on with the charade that she might actually take this job?

“Good. Then it’s all settled.”

“Am I invited too?”

Instantly, Pam’s subconscious placed a face to the female voice behind her. A shrill alarm echoed in her head. On impulse she turned and noticed Tom’s blue eyes harden and glint dangerously at his former wife.

Truths Unveiled

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Chapter Nine

Tom matched the woman's goading smile with an even sneer but said nothing.

"Well look who it is," Eddie's voice boomed. "I never expected to see you in here, Susan. Did hell freeze over already?"

For an instant, Pam caught a chink in Susan's otherwise perfect composure. The stunning redhead recovered quickly with a humorless chuckle and smug smile. Immaculately groomed down to her bright pink toenails, exposed in heeled sandals, and dressed in a yellow silk pantsuit, she definitely commanded an audience.

Pam remembered the dirt and soot still in her hair from the explosion. Was there a closet nearby? She wanted to hide.

Then Pam stopped herself. Most likely, this would be the last time she would ever be in Susan's company again. Thank goodness. The woman reminded her of a nasty villain on a soap opera. From the way her eyes shot daggers at Tom, it was clear those two still had a lot of unresolved issues.

Pam watched Susan's smile transform itself into a perfect pout. "You always make me feel so unwanted, Cousin. I just don't understand it."

Yuck, Pam winced. That little girl voice made her want to barf. She'd forgotten Eddie and Susan were related. Cousins by marriage, she believed.

"Cut to the chase, Susan. What do you want?"

Tom's low, menacing voice caught Susan off guard. She blinked at him, then directed her focus to Pam. "Can you believe these two? They're always so..." Dramatically, she waved her hand in front of her. "So beastly! I am, after all, a paying customer and a prominent citizen of this community."

"This is a waste of time," Tom muttered in a disgusted tone. "Let's go, Pam."

"I came to see Pamela," Susan retorted. "Not either of you. I just heard she arrived in town and thought I'd stop by to say hello."

Pam swallowed. She wants to see me? Why? They'd never been friends. Not even acquaintances. In fact, being five years younger, she'd only seen Susan a couple of times on the street in passing, or in a restaurant when she heard that shrilly voice. As far as she knew, Susan didn't even know her name.

Eddie actually snorted a shot of laughter. “Fine. You said it. Now Pam and Tom are on their way out. It’s time for you to go, too.”

****

Tom checked his rearview mirror to be certain Pam still followed behind him in her Explorer. After leaving the restaurant, they’d returned to the factory site to retrieve the vehicle. Now he led her to the hotel.

Fueled with simmering humiliation and rage, he resisted the urge to gun the engine.

What a fool he’d been, parading Pam around the restaurant like that! What was he thinking? That he could have a normal life without second guessing each move he made, wondering how the Prima Donna would react? He had to be out of his mind. Why won’t Susan just let go? Enough time had passed since the divorce, and they’d separated two years before that. It wasn’t like the years preceding the day she dumped his clothes at the end of the driveway had been filled with marital bliss.

More than disappointed, Tom forced himself to accept the fact that people just loved to talk. He wondered, briefly, if maybe she’d bugged the restaurant. Either that or someone went out of their way to inform Susan of Pam’s arrival. How else did she find out so quickly? And why did she still care?

For a split second, Tom allowed a picture of his sons to materialize. Instantly, he felt the stab of a searing blade pierce the never-healing, gaping wound in his heart. He blanked the image and tightened his jaw, determined to maintain control. “When, God?” he demanded aloud. “When will this crap end?”

Weeks ago, hearing Marlene mention Pam’s name sounded like an answer to Tom’s prayers. He knew life never held any guarantees, but throughout all these years he’d never stopped thinking about her. If nothing else, he intended to seize this opportunity to make things right between them. And maybe, just maybe, they could share something more. Much more.

Now Tom wondered if he had made a mistake. Susan’s predatory appearance this evening made it clear she refused to be ignored. Maybe it was a sign that he didn’t deserve a second chance at being happy. Maybe it was payback for all the wild and crazy things he did in his youth. Maybe happiness was just not part of his pre-written script. After all, he’d sinned.

Forget about forgiveness. He was expected to pay for those sins for the rest of his life.

A tiny part of him hoped Pam could change that. Now, he wasn't so sure. Even if she decided to take the job and move here, was it really fair for him to pursue her? To bring her into the middle of this inferno he'd gotten himself into? Sadly, recalling Susan's challenging smirk, he answered the question. Probably not.

The area's newest hotel came into view. No, Tom resolved, turning into the parking lot. Pam was a great person. She'd been to hell and back, partly due to him. And she'd pulled herself out of it. He, on the other hand, still battled with the same demons.

He'd make this quick, he decided. He'd carry Pam's luggage, bring her inside the hotel, and wish her luck with whatever she decided. And if she did move back? Well, he'd keep his distance. Otherwise, even if she agreed to start dating him again, she'd just end up eventually hating him and breaking it off herself.

Tom helped her out of the Explorer. "You must be exhausted." He knew her meetings started at eight-thirty the next morning. It would be a full day. Her flight back on Sunday would leave at two in the afternoon.

Pam smiled at him and stretched. To divert his attention, Tom opened the back door and reached for her garment bag and suitcase. "Is there anything else you want to bring in?" His experience with women told him there might be more. Even for just a quick overnight stay.

"No, thanks."

"Amazing," he winked. "Oh, and don't forget. The hospital is picking up the hotel tab. That means you can feel free to raid the mini bar for some goodies."

"After that dinner? No way!"

Once registered and given the key card to Pam's room, Tom walked her to the elevator. They stood alone, except for the desk clerk, who left to watch television in the adjacent office.

"I wrote out directions to the hospital," he told her, removing a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. "It will take you about fifteen minutes from here."

Pam placed it in her purse. "Thanks."

Her expression wasn't quite the same one he remembered years ago. Understandably, little of her teenage innocence remained. But still, he saw

the sincerity. And the kindness. And felt that same spark.

“Your eyes are twinkling,” she teasingly accused.

Tom hadn’t blushed in years, but he felt his cheeks burn red hot. Then he thought about what she’d said at the restaurant; about their long-distance relationship not working out anyway.

“You’re all grown up,” he told her. “And you did everything you set out to do.” He cleared his throat. Then lowered his voice. “Maybe that wouldn’t have happened if we’d stayed together. What if we did that long-distance thing and eventually I lured you back here? We could have produced a dozen kids by now. They’d be out with me at dawn, helping with the chores. And you’d be inside, making breakfast, churning butter, beating the laundry down at the brook with a rock.” His eyes glittered at the thought. “What a picture.”

“What a picture is right,” Pam remarked. “I think things worked out fine, just the way they are. Look at you. You’ve got two beautiful sons and you’re the director of rescue operations for a huge medical center. That’s nothing to downplay. Nor is having a seat on the board of directors. I meant what I said before. It’s a great position for you. Tailor made. Although…” The corners of her mouth curved upward.

“Yes.”

She winked and pushed the elevator button. “I’ve never seen you in a suit and tie.”

Tom laughed out loud. “You’re right. And believe me. It doesn’t happen all that often.”

Hearing the elevator, Tom considered how to make a graceful exit. But was he really sure he wanted to? Just being with her seemed to warm the ice he’d packed around his heart minutes ago.

Pam’s expression turned semi-serious. For a second he wondered if she read his thoughts.

“Thank you for tonight,” she said. “Even with the explosion, being here turned out to be much easier than I’d expected. Don’t take this the wrong way, but years ago I made a promise to myself never to come back here again. Or even to the state of Pennsylvania. When I learned Dr. Everett left Chicago to take the position here, and that I was being considered for the ED position…” She left the sentence unfinished and shuddered.

“I bet it blew your resolution right out of the water.”

Pam rolled her eyes. “Exactly. I mean, I definitely felt flattered. But I didn’t even intend to accept this invitation to visit.”

The elevator opened and she stepped in, realizing too late that Tom had joined her inside. So much for his own resolution. Oh well. It took a lot for her to make this trip. And maybe, just maybe, they could still be friends. Right?

Eventually he found his voice. “No offense taken.” He hoped to assure her. “I must admit, I was a bit nervous about you coming back, too.”

Pam drew her brows together, but stayed quiet. Then he knew. No matter what happened between them, it was crucial for her to believe what he was about to say. And he needed to say it now.

Without a second thought, Tom reached out to smooth the worry lines creasing her forehead. He felt her surprise, but then she relaxed. When the elevator arrived at her floor, he followed her out, then reached for her hand.

For a moment, they simply stood there. His head voiced a thousand thoughts and by the expression in her eyes, he suspected she was going through the same thing. Quickly, he prayed that no one would appear and break the mood before he had his say.

Pam smiled at him. “Yes?”

Here was his chance. He could make a joke of it and let the moment pass or he could finally tell her what he wanted to say all these years. Say it! a voice boomed inside his head. Now!

Noticing two upholstered chairs arranged against the wall across from the elevator, Tom grasped Pam’s hand and led her to them. “Please sit down.”

She hesitated, then agreed. He pulled the other chair up close to her and took both her hands.

“You have every right in the world to hate me.”

Lines formed again on her forehead. Her greenish eyes widened. “What?”

“No. Please let me finish. Okay?”

Her eyes questioning, she nodded.

Tom started again. “My last date with Susan was about two weeks before I started seeing you. I swear, after that, I never went out with her again.”

Pam remained silent. He couldn’t read her expression.

Now comes the difficult part. He lowered his gaze to focus on his feet. “It’s hard to admit being negligent about birth control, and premarital sex. The truth is I thought…”

“Tom,” Pam interrupted. “You don’t need to do this.”

“Yes,” he insisted, placing his fingers to her lips. “Yes, I do. And I need to tell you I’m sorry. Because I really am sorry. I know it doesn’t change anything. And maybe you were right tonight when you said we would have probably fizzled out anyway after you left for college. But…”

“But it would have been nice to have that choice?”

Her tone and smile were so genuine. Truthful and matter of fact about a rotten situation, but also understanding. Despite himself, Tom felt the corners of his mouth lift. “That sums it up perfectly.”

This time she reached out to touch him. The effect intoxicated him. Together they stood. Then she yielded to his embrace. His senses devoured the scent of her hair and skin mingled with smoke, and the feel of her arms wrapped around him.

“I’ve missed you,” he heard himself saying. Warning bells followed. This was not what he’d intended, but the words continued to pour out. “After the accident, your folks whisked you back to Boston so fast. I didn’t know what to do.”

Pam clutched him tighter. “I’m so sorry I didn’t write back. Or return your calls.”

“Believe me, I totally understand.” He felt his eyes mist. “You have no reason to apologize.”

“The truth is…” Pam broke their embrace and took a short step backward. “I felt too humiliated. And afraid.”

“What?” Baffled, he held on to her hand. “Why? I’m the one who messed up.” Then Tom saw the deep pain in her eyes. It pierced his soul. “What is it, Pam?” he implored.

Shaking her head, tears erupted down her cheeks, rushing like a waterfall. Tom brushed them away but they kept coming. He held her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. “Please tell me.”

After a moment, Pam steadied her breath. Through trembling lips, she said, “I couldn’t contact you because I wasn’t the same. I’m still not the same. All the scars, my leg…you know I lost part of it in the crash.”

Tom nodded. He’d thought as much, but she sure ran around well enough at the fire scene today. Now that he thought about it, maybe she

climbed the stairs at his restaurant a bit slow, but to him, none of it mattered. If anything, it made him admire her even more for her determination to achieve her dreams.

He recalled that night after the accident. He and Pam's parents cried in the ED waiting room when the orthopedic surgeon told them the badly mangled limb could not be saved. He recalled the anguish that ripped through him for her. What made it worse was the knowing he couldn't help her. Instead, he was stuck dealing with Susan and the mess they'd made.

Pam's parents remained cordial but they hardly looked at him. Obviously, they had learned about his predicament. Soon after hearing the news about Pam's leg, they arranged for her to be moved to a hospital in Boston. She was still in a coma when they left. He never saw her again. Until now.

"And you were engaged," Pam continued. "Then married. Susan carried your baby. After...after that, and everything else, what was left to talk about?"

Tom knew she was right. "But maybe, somehow, I could have been there for you when you went through rehab. It had to be horrible."

To his dismay, her face reddened and her tears increased.

"What is it, Pam? What's upsetting you so much?"

She stared at him long and hard. When she spoke, her words came out in a hoarse whisper. "I deserved it Tom. I caused that accident. I drove my car into that tree that night and killed my best friend and that boy."

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Chapter Ten

Peering at her with disbelief, Tom clutched Pam's shoulders. "No you didn't! It was an accident!"

"No!" she insisted. She tried to shake off his grip, but he held on.

"Honey, I saw the wreck. The storm made driving conditions impossible. Especially for new drivers like you and Ryan Collins on those narrow roads. He was drunker than a skunk, coming around that dangerous curve. There was nothing you could do."

"But how can you be so sure?" Pam implored. His words sounded kind, and he meant to be reassuring, but she knew what she did.

"And that's why you haven't come back here? Because you think you killed them?"

Chewing her bottom lip, Pam looked to the floor. There wasn't anything else to say. Well, almost...

He drew her close. This time, she relented.

Rubbing her back, he whispered, "I should have come to you. You shouldn't have gone through all of that alone. You did nothing wrong, Pam. It was just an accident. A horrible accident."

After a moment, Pam took a step back and lightly touched his cheek. "Thank you. But no matter what you say, I felt responsible for what happened. I still do. And then there was all the jealousy and anger and hurt that I felt over Susan. I knew you needed to be here. You needed to take responsibility." Her sad smile deepened. "And you did."

For a long moment, they simply stood still. Pam could feel her heart beating. Tom took her hand and brought it to his lips. After a gentle kiss, he held it to his chest. "After I found out about Susan, I did what I thought was right, but I'm so sorry for how it affected you and me. The pregnancy never should have happened."

Hearing his words, Pam decided to abandon all pretense. It wouldn't matter anyway. "I missed you more than I ever thought possible," she told him. "My parents were great. They still are. My dad kept reminding me that God must have kept me alive for something. Presumably to be a doctor. So I had to keep going." Then, without warning, her eyes filled again. "But I still haven't figured out why Megan had to die."

"Oh, Pam."

Again, she allowed him to hold her. She couldn’t bear to tell him there was more. Hopefully, she would never have to. Pushing away those thoughts, she wiped her eyes. “Now I’m sorry. I feel like an idiot.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he told her. “I know how close the two of you were. It’s natural to still miss your friend. And it’s probably natural to blame yourself. But please don’t. Please put it all behind you and take the job, Pam. Give us a chance.”

It took a minute for Tom’s words to sink in. Slowly, she moved away, but he held on.

“I’m serious,” he insisted, giving her a shy grin. “Eddie was right. Haven’t we wasting enough time already? I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. I’d been trying to figure out an excuse to contact you, but I wasn’t sure you’d ever want to see me again. Then, when I heard the hospital needed an ED doctor, I immediately thought of you. I considered tracking you down, but then Marlene mentioned your name.” Tom gave her an amazed look. “Talk about a sign from God! I just knew the timing was right.”

Pam felt a giggle escape.

“Excuse me?”

Casting him an apologetic grin, she laughed. “It’s nothing. Really.”

“Somehow I think it’s something.”

“No. It’s just that while you were thinking the timing was right, I was thinking just the opposite. There I was, positively elated to be personally invited to work with Dr. Everett, and then it turned out to be at a hospital located in the very town I intended to avoid for the rest of my life!”

Now it was Tom’s turn to chuckle. “I can see your point.” Then his serious tone returned. “So what about now?”

Still taken by surprise, Pam didn’t know what to say. She’d just told him she killed Megan, and he still wanted her? This was really turning into a very unexpected series of events. Without thinking, she blurted out, “I need to use the bathroom.” With that, she tore down the hall in search of her room.

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Eleven

A brilliant moon illuminated Tom's route to the stone-covered driveway leading to his house. Rusty, his golden retriever, and Delilah, the black lab, met him at the door, barking and jumping hello.

"Hey, guys," he greeted, allowing them to lick his face. He rubbed each of them behind the ears. "How's it going? Ready for one last run before hitting the hay?"

Happily they trotted after him and out the sliding glass doors to the large backyard.

"Pam likes animals," Tom shouted, watching them stretch their limbs. "That's a good thing!"

He felt himself utter a sigh. As if content. How strange. Pondering the new sensation, he leaned against the fence and deeply inhaled the familiar aromas of cattle and crops sharing thousands of acres of fertile land. His land. His family's land.

Off in the distance, he could see row after row of cornstalks and wheat, dancing in the shadows. If he turned around, he knew he'd find a different sight not too far off in the distance: The silhouettes of huge, expensive homes, built on property once belonging to his ex-wife.

Just turn the page, Tom told himself. No reason to go there and get his gut all tied up in a knot. Not after the night he'd just had. No, he switched back to consider life's irony.

He recalled many times when he seriously resented the constant commitment this working farm required. It weighed him down, like a huge chain around his neck, prohibiting him from leaving it alone for more than a day or two. He'd felt trapped. Like a prisoner, serving a life sentence. During high school, it didn't matter how big a hangover he suffered from the night before, partying with his friends. He'd better be out in the barn milking the cows with his dad and brother by dawn. Otherwise, there'd be heck to pay. Sub-zero temperatures, knee-high snow, or even hundred-and-two fevers provided no excuse.

"A successful farm is like a woman," his father told him more than once. "It needs constant and loving tending to. And appreciation for what it provides. Ignore it, even briefly, and you've got a disaster on your hands."

"That's for sure," Tom whispered into the distance.

It became harder after high school, when a few of his friends abandoned their family farms to go to college out of state. None of them came back afterward, except for short visits with their new wives. Then they'd tell their stories of making big money, living in the large cities and determined to stay there. The thought of returning permanently to Middleton was tantamount to failure. They spent their entire lives trying to escape. They'd move back only if there was no other alternative.

Many times they urged Tom to join them. "You got a brother. Let him and your old man run the place," they'd say.

But Tom's younger brother thought like them. He'd be gone soon, and Tom couldn't leave his father in the lurch. It just wouldn't be right. Still, there were many times when Tom considered breaking out. The strongest pull came when Pam and her parents moved back to Boston after the accident. Man, how he detested the trapped feeling that hovered over him. The imaginary chains tightened to the point where, at times, he could hardly catch a breath.

Strangely, it wasn't his sense of duty and obligation to his parents that kept him that time. It was the baby. His baby. He and Susan arranged to get married to provide the child with a family. By that time, he knew Pam would always be the love of his life. But his child needed a father. And for better or worse, he needed to fill those shoes. Unfortunately, Susan always brought out the worst in him.

With seven years between him and Pam, they'd had few mutual friends except Eddie and Megan. Though he doubted Pam knew Susan personally, Susan knew her. Probably because of Tom's obvious interest in the cute, city girl.

"She's an outsider," Susan often snarled, her voice laced with acid over the telephone. She became angry when Tom stopped asking her out and then turned down her suggestions that they get together. When he didn't return her calls, she'd call his house late at night. Many times he suspected she'd been drinking. She'd heard about Pam through the proverbial grapevine gossip that ran rampant around town. "What's this about little miss fancy pants?" she'd demand, accusingly. "Always going around, trying to prove how smart she is. What would you want with her? Better yet, what would she want with you?"

Tom tended to ignore the constant little feuds that took place between women. The pettiness, the envy or jealousy. If anything, he found those

types of scenes comical. He had no idea how threatened Susan felt, even after they married. Nor did he take seriously her plan to merge the Jarrod and Murphy land holdings to form a great dynasty, as she called it, and subdivide it to sell to a developer.

If you asked Tom, Susan watched too much television. What she was describing sounded like the 1980s evening soap opera, Dynasty, with her playing the Joan Collins role. He didn't understand, until too late, that Susan meant every word she said. And she was determined to get her way.

So, although the noose tightened, he stayed. He called and wrote Pam for nearly a year. Then gave up. Years later, when he became convinced his marriage was doomed, he thought about taking off again. Then, one day his father showed up at the city house where Tom and Susan lived. It had been a wedding present from her father.

"There's a few cows looking like they got through the fence. They're straying onto Parson's place. I need a hand."

"Sure, Dad," Tom answered. He hoped the physical labor would take his mind off his problems.

John Jarrod stayed silent during the entire ten-minute trip. Which was fine with Tom. He wasn't sure he could control himself to utter anything other than obscenities at the time. When they got to the farm, he noticed two of their five horses were saddled up, looking like they were waiting for them.

"Let's go for a ride," his father said, not waiting for a reply. Silent again, they rode to the top of the highest point of their property, overlooking their land for miles around.

His father slowed the horse. "No matter what, Son," he began. "This land belongs to you. Sometimes, it doesn't yield as much as we want. And most times, I know, it seems like just one big pain in the butt. But it will always be here for you."

Tom and his father never shared what one could call a really close relationship. Sure they got along, but John Jarrod was a quiet man. He came and went as he pleased, he worked hard and long, and he held a lot close to the chest. This was the first time Tom could remember him using so many words at one time. And, to Tom's surprise, he wasn't finished.

"I guess it was the way I was raised, but I always figured you, me, and your brother would always live here and work the land and the animals together. Sure, you'd get married, have some kids, but we'd always be

together.” He shrugged. “It sort of threw me when Ted said he wanted to go to college. It shocked me more when he didn’t move back after graduating. I don’t like it, but I’ve tried to understand and accept it. The same way I’ve tried to understand you marrying Susan and moving into that big, fancy house in town.” He paused to adjust the Phillies baseball cap shadowing the midday sun from his face. Then sighed.

“I guess I really can’t blame you. People just don’t stay put the way they used to. And there are so many choices now. So many opportunities that weren’t available in my younger days. It wasn’t that way for me growing up. My life, like your grandfather’s, even your mom’s, was already mapped out for me.

“I got to tell you. After you moved out of the house, I gave it only a couple of weeks before you didn’t turn up one morning to work the cows. It’s tough enough dragging ourselves out of bed at those awful hours, just to walk a few yards to the barn. A twelve-mile trip each day, two times a day, was asking a bit much I figured.”

Tom realized his father was now looking at him. “Maybe I’m talking too soon, but it hasn’t happened yet. You’ve showed up every day, even more on time than when we lived under the same roof. I want to thank you for that.”

To Tom, this entire conversation was unimaginable. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat.

“Sure, Dad.”

“I guess the reason I brought you out here today was because I wanted you to know that Mom and I understand if you want out. For a while or for however long you need. We can sell a bunch of acres and give you the cash. Sort of like part of your inheritance in advance, if that’s what you want. You got to live your life. This business with Susan is…” he shook his head. “I can’t tell you the right thing to do.” He shrugged.

“I don’t know what the right thing is, Son. Just, just do what you got to do. And know that no matter what, no matter how long you take, remember this…” He pointed out to the horizon, “All this, for good or bad, will always be waiting for you.”

Tom couldn’t remember the last time he cried in front of his father. Or when he last cried, period. Looking out into the distance, he blinked back the tears.

“And when I die,” his dad continued, this time with a lighter tone, “if you want to sell the whole thing to one of those big developers Susan’s always harping about, do it with my blessings. Just be sure to take good care of Mom and those boys of yours.”

Tom couldn’t believe those words came out of his father’s mouth. Amazed, he could only stare.

“You heard me right,” the old man grinned. “If something causes you misery, and you’ve done your absolute best to put things right, but it just ain’t working, you move on, Man! Life ain’t no dress rehearsal. This is the real show!” With that, he turned the horse around. “Race you back!”

That conversation created a turning point in Tom’s life. No longer did he feel the need to flee his family’s legacy. Instead, it became his haven. He would not divorce Susan, he decided. If she wanted out, she could start the proceedings. In the meantime, while they remained man and wife, he would not cheat, and he would always be civil toward her, even friendly, if she’d allow it. With one stipulation. She could forget any of her real estate plans involving the Jarrod property. That topic was not up for discussion.

But Susan refused to let it rest. Numerous times, too many to count, she brought it up, over and over again. She even got her real estate license. And each time, Tom’s answer remained the same. He would not be part of any type of two-family merger. Nor would he meet with the land developer she’d been pestering him about to parcel off a large chunk and build half-million-dollar homes. Being the exclusive broker for the project, she could earn a hefty sum, but Tom wasn’t willing to hear any of it. She could do what she wanted with her family’s land. And leave his family’s land alone.

Stretching, Tom shrugged off the old memories, like someone removing an old, rain-soaked slicker. He looked up at the stars decorating the sky. Even now, it never ceased to amaze him how easily he could connect the dots to the Big Dipper and other constellations. And the planet Jupiter still continued to burn bright, slightly below the moon. Tonight it looked like they were winking specifically at him.

Tom’s thoughts turned back to Pam. There he was, resolved to cast aside the romantic images he’d been conjuring up to protect her from Susan’s wrath.

Then poof! Once in her presence, her eyes pouring into his, all his concerns vaporized. Of course Pam’s feelings mattered too, but at least she

didn’t call him names or forbid him to come near her. In fact, unless he read her wrong, she seemed pleased to see him once the shock wore off.

“I like her, Lord,” he voiced aloud. “I always have. I know she’s got some concerns about being back here. And a lot of bad memories. I didn’t know she blamed herself. I feel awful about that. I should have been there for her. I’ve got so much making up to do. I’d just like for her to give me the chance. And if she does, please help out in the Susan department. Pam is totally innocent there. I don’t want her or the boys subjected to any more crap.”

Tom paused a moment, hoping his message reached its destination. Raised Christian, he grew up believing in God. His personal faith, however, had developed and deepened through his experience with his failed marriage. It began that afternoon when he and his dad took that ride together. Since then, though not overtly religious, he became convinced life held no coincidences.

Once Tom opened his heart and his mind, the numerous events that followed taught him that lesson. Life was no longer a shoot-from-the-hip kind of adventure, or a trial-and-error, see-as-you-go kind of thing. He knew better now. He also knew that God operated according to His own timetable. In fact, sometimes it felt like He was on vacation, so to speak. Yes, some prayers were better left unanswered. But hopefully that would not be the case where Pam was concerned.

“Come on in, guys,” he called to the dogs. He felt lighter than he’d felt in years. “Let’s try to get some shuteye. Today’s already here!”

Closing up the house for the night, Tom heard his cell phone ring.

“Okay, where is it?” he muttered, scanning the counters and tabletops. At the same time, he wondered who would call now. The factory fire entered his thoughts. He hoped it hadn’t reignited.

Finally, he spotted the phone on top of the refrigerator.

“Jarrod here,” he answered, without checking the caller ID.

“You’d better tell Eddie Cartwright to watch his mouth!”

Tom’s subconscious recognized the voice before he did, causing his entire body to tense into a huge knot. “Tell him yourself, Susan.”

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twelve

Pam slowed the Explorer for a cattle crossing. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen one of these,” she said aloud. Inhaling the aroma of freshly mowed fields, she shifted the SUV into park and settled back, drinking in the vast farmland of multicolored greens and browns and gold.

What a beautiful morning. She marveled at how the sun’s rays sparkled off the numerous silver silos that dotted the surrounding countryside. And how she had forgotten how truly beautiful it could be here. Then again, to be fair, it was the same in the city. In those quiet, still, early hours, she enjoyed walking through the streets. She liked watching the sun peek between the various skyscrapers, waiting for the countless numbers of residents, commuters and tourists to arrive. She knew she could handle a new city. Chicago, for instance. But could she handle living here again?

Pushing aside the question, Pam checked Tom’s directions. The medical center was still ten miles away. She peeked in the rearview mirror to see how well she’d concealed the dark circles under her eyes.

“And to think we stayed up most of the night!” she exclaimed. Without thinking, she touched her lips, recalling Tom tenderly outlining them with his forefinger before leaning down to kiss her.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a very long time,” he’d whispered, lightly brushing the tendrils from her face.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,”

“I figured you’d say that.” He kissed her again, long and slow.

At first, Pam braced her feet on the ground certain he could hear the pounding of her heart. But as his kiss persisted, her will diminished. Parting her lips, she raised her arms and placed them around his neck.

A car horn beeped behind her, sending her into a tizzy.

Startled, Pam grimaced and moved forward. This is not the place nor the time for romantic fantasies, she thought. Only fools made monumental career decisions based on their libido or memories of puppy love.

Chicago held no attachments to the past, she reasoned. She wouldn’t need to think about anything other than her patients. And isn’t that the way it should be? The reason she worked so terribly hard all these years? A personal life never fit into the plan. How could it, when someone else’s life or death hinged on every microsecond? On every decision she made? So

what caused her to even consider the possibility of coming back here? Two kisses—all right, so it was three kisses—couldn't change the past. Instead, they only served to complicate the future.

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As anticipated, Pam spent the next eight hours taking tours and attending meetings. Though she tried to remain objective, even critical, she found the facility and its staff, well, phenomenal. Last night's brief introduction scarcely scratched the surface. And the staff's positive and helpful attitude immediately drew her right in.

Late in the afternoon, Pam arrived at her last meeting. It took place in a very impressive, wood-paneled conference room, complete with brass trim and floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out to the nearby Pocono Mountains.

Marlene Everett met her at the door and introduced her to several physicians and board members. Tom, she noted, did not attend. Good. She needed to make sure her feelings toward him, whatever they may be, did not cloud her judgment.

"As you might guess, Pam," one of the board members said, while pouring himself a cup of coffee, "We all share an overwhelming commitment to this project. Would you care to share any of your observations?"

Pam recognized Dr. Coleman Porter, known internationally for his wizardry in orthopedic surgery. Over the years, he had saved the careers of many famous athletes injured on the playing field. To work with him only added to the plus side of the list Pam was creating to help her make her final decision. At that thought, her throat tightened with apprehension.

Dear Lord, she prayed silently. Please help me out here.

"The logs I've read show a lot of activity on a daily basis," she remarked, hoping she didn't sound like an idiot. It was hard not to feel intimidated by him and the other highly accomplished professionals seated at the table. Along with him and Marlene Everett, the hospital had recruited many other specialists out of New York and Philadelphia who had agreed to provide their expertise on an alternating basis.

Marlene nodded. "That's for sure. A skeleton crew has been working practically nonstop, around the clock. That's why we," she gestured to include everyone in the room, "would like to extend you an offer now. If you accept, we ask that you start right after Thanksgiving."

There it was. The offer Pam dreaded and yet felt honored to receive. Was it her imagination or were they all staring at her? Did they expect her to give them her answer then and there?

“And if possible,” Marlene continued, brushing cannoli crumbs from her lab coat. “We’d like your decision by the end of next week.”

Fortunately, another doctor spoke before Pam could think of what to say.

“And if you take the job, at least you won’t be starting in July with the new interns.”

The group laughed. Pam joined them, knowing he referred to the fact that new medical school graduates all over the country typically began their first hospital internships each July. Fortunately, most emergency room patients weren’t aware of this. Otherwise they might hesitate to enter the building that month.

While these new, very green doctors adjusted to their surroundings and onerous responsibilities, they expended a lot of energy hiding their insecurities. After all, what patient wanted to see their doctor down half a bottle of antacids before treating them?

Eventually, most of the new recruits grew accustomed to the constant sense of anxiety eating away in the pits of their stomachs. As their exposure to treating patients increased, hopefully without killing anyone in the process, so did their confidence level. Still, everyone found it to be a harrowing experience. Including the more experienced physicians they worked with.

“Hey, baptism by fire. Is there any other way?” someone joked.

Pam read his ID badge. Carl Tedford, staff psychiatrist.

“And boy did we burn,” Dr. Porter chimed in.

“Did I ever tell you about my first day at UPENN?” Tedford asked the group.

Pam listened to him elaborate about his early days, thankful that the spotlight was now on him. Watching him, a weird feeling descended upon her. Had they met somewhere before? Maybe at a medical conference. Then she realized it wasn’t his appearance that tweaked her memory. No, it would be hard to forget that full head of jet black hair and that tanned complexion, both of which contrasted handsomely with his good-natured gray eyes. His female patients probably fell instantly in love with him.

As Pam continued to listen to the psychiatrist’s antics, she realized she recognized his voice from somewhere. Low and deep. And commanding. She felt certain she had heard it before. But where?

As she tried to remember, she felt goose bumps erupt on her arms. They traveled to the back of her neck. That wasn’t good. Why did it bother her so much?

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirteen

“Hey, Auntie,” Pam greeted over her cell phone. In the Explorer now, she drove out of the hospital’s parking lot. Carolyn Ferrara was one of Pam’s closest friends. She also happened to be her father’s younger sister.

“Hey, yourself! How was it?”

Pam groaned. “It was awful.”

“Worse than you expected?”

“No. A zillion times better!” Pam exclaimed. “I’m more confused now than ever. The place is great. First class all the way. The staff is so out of this world, I’m afraid to open my mouth because I’m convinced I’ll put my foot in it!”

“So, it’s a smart career move? Even better than Chicago or staying in Boston?”

Pam chewed her bottom lip. Having sworn off rural America for more than a decade, she found it unsettling to acknowledge her wavering resolve.

“Your silence tells me that they’re at least equal.”

Making a left at a traffic light, Pam sighed. “Unfortunately, you’re right. It’s a pilot program with national exposure and the best equipment and training available.”

“See? Isn’t that wonderful? We knew there had to be a reason why you were sent there.”

“I knew you were going to say that.” She could just picture her aunt, the eternal optimist, watering her numerous rare and exotic plants in the florist shop she owned in Princeton, New Jersey. Pam often teased that God created cordless phones just for her. The woman forever carried on at least one telephone conversation, sometimes more, and at the same time ran a fantastically lucrative business.

Pam pushed a stray lock of hair away from her face. “But do you really think so? The idea still gives me the willies. Of all the places in the world, why Middleton? It’s the only place in the world that I absolutely detest!”

“Maybe that’s why you’ve been sent back there. Did you get a chance to drive around the area yet?”

“Yeah. And guess what? The whole town and surrounding area got a facelift. It’s become a major tourist spot. I could even get to like it if…”

“Put the ifs, could haves and should haves away,” Carolyn corrected. “They only confuse things. Did you run into anyone you know?”

Pam squirmed. They both knew who “anyone” was. “Not only have I seen him, it appears he recommended me for the job.”

Carolyn chuckled. “Well isn’t that’s interesting? Is he still…”

“Married?” Pam filled in. “No.”

“Ah.”

“Ah?”

“Um-hm.”

Pam frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“There’s no way that ah and um-hm don’t mean something. What’s on your mind? Are you worried because he’s divorced?”

“Don’t be silly,” her aunt assured her. “People make mistakes, Pam. Marriage involves two people who vow before God to do everything in their power to love, honor and cherish each other. But sometimes all the trying and all the prayers in the world aren’t going to make that happen. I can’t believe God wants us to be miserable. It’s up to Him to judge. Not us.”

Pam agreed, but it felt better to hear it from someone else. And she truly believed Tom did the best he could. Susan probably did, too. It was just a tough situation.

“Tom invited me and some friends to his house for dinner tonight.”

“Wonderful!” Carolyn exclaimed. “Have a great time. Enjoy yourself. See what develops.”

“But?”

Carolyn released a loud breath. “Just be careful, kiddo.”

“I know.” Over the past twenty-four hours, every time Pam started to relax just a little, bits and pieces of the past resurrected themselves, reminding her of so many horrible memories.

“I mean about ex-wives and children. It can be difficult sometimes. And you could get caught up in the middle without even realizing it.”

Pam slowed the Explorer for a stop sign. “Oh. I wasn’t even thinking about that.” And she wasn’t. A picture of Susan came to mind. She swallowed. “Yeah, that could be a problem.”

“Just keep it in mind. So what were you thinking about? Is it the accident?”

Pam sighed. “People don’t forget, Auntie. I guess I just feel so exposed. At least in Boston, or even Chicago, I can be anonymous. Here, there are no secrets. About anything.”

“Oh, Pam. Even if you did do something wrong, Jesus forgave you a long time ago. Isn’t it time you learned to start forgiving yourself?”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Fourteen

True to his word, Tom arrived at Pam's hotel precisely at six o'clock that evening. The sunset had passed its midpoint and he felt anxious for her to see his home before dark.

"Do you remember any of this?" he asked, entering Windsor Knoll, the tiny village where he lived. It bordered Middleton on the eastern side. Ironically, thanks in part to Susan's efforts to increase the town's property values, the village had recently become a historical landmark.

"Of course I do. Once I got my driver's license and my grandfather's old Buick Skylark, I drove up here every chance I got, hoping to catch a glimpse of you."

"I'm flattered."

"So you should be," Pam teased. "Gas jumped fifty cents a gallon that summer I started driving. It took me a quarter of a tank to get from my house to yours in that gas guzzler." After a pause, she pointed, "Isn't that your farm?"

"Yup. Twenty-five hundred acres' worth, give or take a few." He passed the main barn and turned into the quarter mile stone driveway.

Pam gazed out the window, then pointed to the right. "I thought the entrance was over there."

"It was. We've made some renovations over the years. Let me know what you think."

But words weren't necessary. When the house came into view, he heard Pam utter a slight gasp.

"Oh, Tom. It's beautiful."

He parked in the circular drive, then met her on the passenger's side of the truck and helped her out. The house, his house, was a three-story A-frame. It sat on the very spot where he and his father had shared that talk some years back, overlooking the glory beyond.

"It's more than beautiful," she marveled. "Look at this view! I can see for miles!"

Tom retrieved the ice cream cake Pam had bought at the grocery store, then watched her wander over to a couple of cows who had made their way up there to graze. The smile she sent back to him took his breath away. He couldn't help noticing how well she blended into the scene. Yet it was so

contrary to who she was. To Tom, she would always be that little, rich girl from the big city. Could she really be happy here?

That thought caused Susan's hate-filled words to ring in his ears. "What would Pam Harrington ever want with you?" He could just hear her snide remark.

Yet, more than once, he found himself asking the same question. They came from such different worlds. Who knows? Maybe that instigated part of the initial attraction.

But instantly they seemed to click. What ever drew them together quickly deepened into so much more. Now with the town's economic boom and the new medical center, their worlds had blended.

Studying her, Tom silently asked the question again. Could she really be happy here?

As if in response, Pam walked toward him beaming. He noted the sun making its slow descent behind her. "What's for dinner?"

Tossing away caution, Tom wrapped his arms around her in a bear hug and twirled her off the ground. Slowing down, their eyes met.

Suddenly, he was so aware of her in his arms. She smelled like a meadow of wild flowers. Her smiling lips were mere inches away. Their magnetic force pulled him closer and closer, until they finally touched.

After a long moment, he took her hand and led her inside the house.

"What a welcome!" Pam kneeled down to accept the dogs' wet tongues on her face and hands. Then she stood and surveyed the interior.

Tom alternated directing his attention to the main course in the open kitchen and watching her reaction to the home he'd recently completed.

The open floor plan included a living area two steps below the rest of the first floor. Pam walked over to the two sets of French doors that opened onto a large deck. It contained a barbeque, patio furniture and a hot tub. The front room windows comprised the entire wall. Facing west, they provided perfect views of the evening sunset.

As Pam returned to the kitchen area, he could tell by her expression that she was impressed.

"This looks so spectacular. I've never imagined anything like it. Did you design it?"

Tom shrugged. "I built it, too. And you thought my talents were limited to milking cows and driving ambulances."

“I never believed that for a minute,” she countered. “But this is truly amazing.” She paused at the black lacquer dining table.

He selected peach and aqua placemats and napkins to go with his mother’s china and crystal.

“Eddie’s brothers are contractors. They really helped out.”

“You must be very proud,” she said as he tossed the salad. “How long did it take?”

“That depends on how you calculate it. We started about six years ago.”

“When did you finish?”

“About three days ago.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Fifteen

The broad grin Tom tossed Pam told her that the house's completion date was not a coincidence. Before she could think of something to say, a sudden, loud screeching sound pierced the air. In response, the dogs barked wildly, running to the door. At the same time, Eddie came barreling inside, followed by a medium-built, pretty woman with short, caramel-colored hair. That must be Rebecca, his wife, Pam determined.

"What's all the commotion?" Eddie roared, greeting the excited dogs. He knelt down to pet them and accepted the ball that one of them offered.

Laughing, Pam watched Tom turn off the oven timer and urge the dogs to settle down. After making a quick introduction, Eddie said to Rebecca, "Honey, you should have seen these two, back a dozen or so years ago. They had the hottest thing going on between them and couldn't do a single thing about it. Tom couldn't shut up about her. I was so relieved when she finally turned eighteen. Otherwise, I thought for sure he would end up in jail!"

Tom sent a wink in Pam's direction and shoved a breadbasket in Eddie's hands. "Here. Make yourself useful. Put this on the table."

"As you can see, Eddie is just as tactful as ever," Rebecca teased, pushing her husband toward the dining room.

"When's dinner?" Eddie called out over his shoulder. "I'm starved."

"Everybody take a seat in the living room," Tom called out. "Appetizers are coming out now. Help yourselves to ice tea and sodas from the bar."

Once everyone settled on the comfortable couches and chairs, Pam asked Rebecca how she and Eddie met. She remembered Eddie being a crazy, confirmed bachelor, second only to Tom. She knew he'd joined the fire department right after high school, and she'd sometimes see him at accident scenes when she rode for Hopewell's ambulance company. Now, according to Tom, in addition to jointly running the restaurant he was a deputy chief and very active in county politics.

Eddie plopped a cracker smothered with brie and raspberry sauce into his large mouth. After swallowing it in one gulp, he answered, "I got hurt on the job about ten years ago."

"And they still talk about him at the hospital," Rebecca interjected, grinning at him. "I just finished nursing school a month before and he

became one of my first patients. He chased every female in sight, on crutches, no less, and while hooked up to an IV bottle!"

Feigning innocence, Eddie batted his brown eyes in his wife's direction. "Yeah, but that stopped the minute I laid my eyes on you, darling. We tied the knot six months later."

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To Pam's astonishment, the evening flew by. It was after eleven by the time she and Tom walked the Cartwrights to their car.

"Sorry we're leaving so early," Eddie apologized, opening the door for his wife. "Our babysitter has a midnight curfew."

Pam had loved hearing about their young children's antics. In fact, she enjoyed the entire evening. She accepted a quick hug from Eddie, then felt Rebecca squeeze her hand. "I hope we see you again very soon."

"Yeah. I know this might feel like a big change from what you're used to," Eddie added. "But the new medical center is top notch, and I know the old man here," he tilted his head toward Tom, "would love for you to stick around."

"Good night, Eddie," Tom urged through a tight smile.

A few minutes later, waving goodbye, Pam said, "I like them a lot."

Tom took her hand and headed back into the house. "I'm glad. Eddie can get a bit rowdy, but he means well."

The warmth of his touch soared up Pam's arm and permeated throughout her entire body. She'd been waiting for this all day. Was last night's flirtation simply that? She asked herself. Were they just setting the past straight? Or was it more?

Reaching for the screen door, Tom said, "Though I tried to cut Eddie off, I hope you know he's right."

"About?" Pam didn't want to sound coy. On the other hand, she wanted to make sure they were talking about the same thing.

"About me liking the idea of you coming back here. For good."

"That's just because of that finder's fee you'll get if I take the job."

Tom tilted his head, considering the idea. "I forgot about that." Then broke into a grin and mussed her hair. "Yeah."

They walked hand in hand to sit close on the couch. "I guess what I mean is…" He clasped both her hands in his and adjusted himself so that he could peer into her eyes. "If you're interested, I'd like us to…" Again, he broke into a nervous grin. "Heck. I feel like we're back where we started.

Asking you out for a pizza and a movie with your father looking on." He released one hand and wiped it on his pant leg. "My palms are even sweaty."

Pam arched a skeptical brow. "Really? If I remember right, you were quite the ladies' man back then."

"Yeah, well, not where you were concerned. A guy still gets nervous when he's talking to a girl he really cares about." He paused. "And he's not totally sure of her answer."

Pam found herself reaching for his free hand. "You were saying?"

"You're not going to make this easy. Are you?"

Her smile broad, she shook her head.

"Okay. Here goes." He released a deep breath. "I'd like us to date."

"To date?"

"Yeah. You know. Like tonight. I pick you up. We go out. Or stay in. We have a good time. Then I drive you home. Maybe we stop along the way. Or maybe you invite me in to your place for coffee, or something."

Hearing his words, Pam felt a warm glow flow through her. Before she could respond, he added, "And the offer isn't strictly contingent on you taking the job. I'm willing to try the long-distance thing if you decide to go to Chicago or stay in Boston. It could get tough sometimes, trying to coordinate schedules, but it wouldn't be impossible. And I think it's worth a try."

Caught off guard, Pam took a quick breath. In her fantasies she had considered that possibility but then always quickly discarded it. Relationships were hard enough, even without that type of added complication. But looking into Tom's blue eyes, she found herself hopelessly losing herself in this man.

Pam thought about her previous relationships. She'd dated several men since Tom over the years. A few she had considered semi-serious, but none ever gave her the same feeling she experienced when she'd been with him. The kind where you can't eat, you're too excited to sleep, the sun rises and sets over him and you can't wait until you see him again—that sort of feeling. Eventually, she reached the conclusion that those feelings were restricted to young puppy love. Now, to her chagrin, she realized they had returned in full force, even stronger than before.

But fourteen years is a long time, her logical side warned. We hardly knew each other back then. And so many things have happened since.

Today and yesterday don’t even add up to a full twenty-four hours. What if I moved here, started dating, and then we broke up? Where would I be then? Stuck here? It would be impossible to avoid each other. I’ll work in the ED. He’ll bring in patients. Could I handle that?

But this may be my second chance, her emotional side countered. It wasn’t right, back then. Now, maybe it is. I’ve been praying for the perfect job in an ED. I’ve also been praying for the opportunity to make full use of your medical skills and abilities. In life, there are no coincidences. Something brought me back here. Something powerful and purposeful. If I reject this opportunity, I might wonder “what if...?” for the rest of my life?

“And,” Tom said, bringing her back to the present. “I know I have some issues I’ve got to work on.”

“Everybody does,” Pam concurred, thinking of her own. Then she looked to him. Susan and their two sons. Considering that, she recalled a phrase Aunt Carolyn often quoted. She grinned. “Some people enter relationships carrying a suitcase. Others drag along a truckload.”

Half wincing, Tom rolled his eyes. “Let’s just say mine is equivalent to a tandem tractor trailer.”

“Oh, my. Care to elaborate?”

“No. Not now, anyway. I’ll handle it.”

Pam pondered his words, trying to ignore the warning bells ringing in the distance of her mind. Common sense told her to inquire further, but she felt too happy to press. For now, she decided to go along with what Tom said. He’d handle his stuff. And she’d handle hers.

Watching her intently, he whispered, “So what do you say?”

Pam opened her mouth to speak, just as Tom’s cell phone ring pierced the air.

He released a loud exhale and read the caller ID. “It’s the station. I told them not to bother me unless it was an emergency.”

“Saved by the bell,” Pam giggled.

Five minutes later, they sat in Tom’s Avalanche, heading toward her hotel. “I’m really sorry about this,” Tom repeated, maneuvering the dark roads. “Something’s gone wrong with the rescue station’s telephone lines. No emergency calls are getting through.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Pam assured him. “This is what we do.”

His cell phone rang again. She touched his arm while he spoke into the phone.

“A virus?” Tom’s tone sharpened. “What kind of virus? Fine. Yes. I agree. I’ll be there in about twenty minutes. Call me if anything changes.”

Disconnecting the line, he said, “The technician working on the problem believes the malfunction is somehow related to the computers. The entire system went down and the auxiliary power provides only half the capacity.”

“That’s not good.”

“My thoughts exactly. Hopefully the experts can fix it fast.” Then without warning, Tom switched subjects. “How about I drive you to the airport tomorrow? I’ll pick you up at around eight. We can get some breakfast along the way.”

Pleased, yet surprised, Pam nodded. “Sure. I’d like that.”

Moments later, he drove up to the hotel entrance.

“Don’t get out,” she told him. “I know you’ve got to go.”

“Not without a kiss.” When he leaned over, she met him halfway. As their lips met, her eyes closed, transporting her back to another time. Just like the night before. He felt new, yet so familiar.

“I’ll call you later, if it’s not too late,” he promised. Then holding her face between his hands, he kissed her again.

****

Unlocking her hotel door, Pam relived the past few hours. With everything else being equal, Tom Jarrod could tip the scales either way. On one hand, if she moved back here, and the past caught up with her, she’d lose. On the other, if she just left and didn’t return, she could be giving up the best thing that ever happened to her.

For the most part, Pam never gave much consideration to a social life. Sure, in recent years there hadn’t been much free time. But now she realized that had been her excuse. More accurately, she didn’t believe she deserved a serious relationship. Yet, in these past twenty-four hours, Tom changed that.

Getting undressed, Pam wondered, Can it work, God? Is Aunt Carolyn right? Is this why you sent me here? So I could learn to forgive myself, and for Tom and me to start over?

The exuberance Pam began experiencing last night while with Tom doubled its strength. Smiling and feeling like a giddy teenager, she found the mystery novel she’d started reading on the plane. A long hot soak in the tub sounded great. Heading toward the bathroom, she noticed the bathroom

light, glowing under the semi-closed door. No big deal. Maybe the maid forgot to turn it off when she cleaned the room. Armed with the book and a nightshirt, she opened the door. Then froze in terror.

Taped to the large mirror above the sink, Pam saw what appeared to be the original newspaper article and photograph. There was no mistaking the headline. She recognized it before her brain registered the words: TWO TEENS DEAD IN FATAL CRASH! ONE DRIVER SURVIVED!

Underneath the article, someone had written in red, YOU KILLED THEM! LEAVE HERE NOW OR FACE THE CONSEQUENCES!

Unable to breathe, Pam sank to the cold tile floor. Sights and sounds, long buried, flashed before her eyes, swirling in circles like a fiery tornado. Hot tears, filled with anger and frustration, grief and unbearable pain, poured down her cheeks. She hugged her knees and rocked back and forth, wracked with sobs.

Soundlessly, she screamed out, “MEGAN!!!!”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Sixteen

With two hours of sleep under his belt, Tom knocked on Pam's hotel room door. After a moment, he frowned. That's odd. Why isn't she answering? He thought about the prior night's hectic events. The technician had been right. Somehow, a complicated virus entered the rescue station's main computer system and corrupted a large part of their files. He didn't get a chance to take a second breath and pick up the phone to call Pam until way after two. Deciding not to wake her, he'd delved back to work until four.

"She checked out, sir,"

Tom turned to find the chambermaid at the entrance to the room next door.

"Excuse me?"

"She checked out. There's no one in there."

Confused, Tom frowned, "When?" To himself, he asked, Why?

"Late last night," she replied.

Too impatient to wait for the elevator, Tom tore down the five flights of stairs. Out of breath, he reached the front desk and found only one clerk on duty. Three people stood in front of him, waiting their turn. Biting back his temper, he scanned the room. Why did she do this? Everything was going so well! There must be some mistake!

Indecision weighed heavily on Tom's shoulders. Should he wait here and see if she left him a message, or go directly after her? He'd left his house in a hurry this morning. Maybe she called and explained on his voice mail.

Once in his truck, Tom pounded his home number on the cell phone.

"You have one message," the mechanical voice mail responded.

"Ugh!" He wasn't sure if he should feel relieved or filled with dread.

Accessing the message, his pulse raced.

"Tom? It's Pam. I'm sorry to leave things this way but I've decided to take the job in Chicago. Thank you for this weekend. I wish you all the best. Goodbye."

She sounded flat, he noted. Like she'd turned into a zombie. Did something bad happen? When he left her last night, he felt certain the odds were in his favor. He pictured her face. Her smile. The way she touched

him. What could it be? What made her change her mind? Did Susan contact her and fill her with lies? Or threats?

****

At two-twenty-five that afternoon, Tom boarded a plane to Newark, New Jersey. Taking his seat, he glanced again at the remaining ticket in the blue and white envelope. The connecting flight to Boston's Logan Airport left at six.

"I should have gone to her years ago," he repeated for the thousandth time under his breath. Tasting a familiar bitterness in his mouth, he thought about his sons. Contrary to his original belief, marrying Susan hadn't made any difference in the way things eventually turned out. Well, he'd learned his lesson. Given this second opportunity, he wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

But what could have happened? He asked himself again. What made Pam run? He wracked his brain, rewinding the past thirty-six hours. Did he miss a clue? What went wrong? Why did she leave like that? Excuse me, Lord. Hello? What's going on?

****

The seven hour trip back to Boston whizzed by in a total blur. After driving through the dark, early morning hours, Pam arrived at the airport and paced the length of it, waiting for the first flight to Boston. Thank God for an available seat.

Exhausted, she unlocked her condo door, threw the bolt behind her and disconnected the telephone. The red message light on the answering machine blinked wildly, but she ignored it and pulled the plug out of the wall socket.

Finally safe, the devastation Pam fought to suppress while out in public immediately overtook her senses. A sudden wave of nausea sent her head and her stomach reeling. Reaching for the couch, she collapsed, keeping one foot on the floor in the hope of stopping the room from spinning. At the same time, she heard and felt an uncontrollable sob erupt from deep inside her soul.

"Dear God, please make this stop! I can't fight it any more. Show me what to do to fix it. Please!"

At the same time, Pam called upon the concentration skills she'd perfected during medical school and tried to compel her mind to gain control. It didn't work. Images of the accident, so vivid she could touch

them, invaded her thoughts. They forced her to relive that horrible nightmare again and again and again. Eventually, she cried herself to sleep.

For a blissful moment, in between sleep and waking, Pam's mind blocked out the details of her dilemma. All that remained was a nagging knot in the pit of her stomach and a dull buzzing sound in her ears.

Inevitably, like most mornings, scenes of the accident came rushing back into Pam's consciousness. Sometimes it came like one huge wave crashing down upon her. Other times it came in quick glimpses. Either way, she'd grown accustomed to them and managed to escape their paralyzing hold by bolting up from bed and whisking through her morning routine. Then she'd race to the hospital to immerse herself in her work. Only there, in the emergency room, could she clear her thoughts. Only there did she feel her life produced any value.

Over the years, the wound that had shredded Pam's heart and soul finally began to heal. But now it felt raw again, as if savagely ripped open once again, exposing even the tiniest nerves.

"I knew I shouldn't have gone back!" she chastised herself. "I knew someone would remember. Ryan Collins' family still lives in the area. And Megan's, too." And that's why she had stayed away so long. What happened could not be forgotten or forgiven. But with her away, at least they weren't faced with seeing her day in and day out. One of them must have heard she'd come back. Their own grief probably resurrected itself and compelled them to break into her hotel room. Not only was she a reminder. She was also a sitting duck for their unresolved pain.

Disoriented but now awake, Pam willed herself to function as close to normal as possible. She would get through this, she resolved. First, she'd shower. Then she'd gather the documents she needed to accept the position at Chicago General and take them with her to the hospital. Next, she'd email a thank-you note to Marlene Everett and decline the position in Middleton.

Feeling somewhat more in control, Pam headed for the bathroom. With that issue settled, one still remained. Tom. No matter how hard she tried to dismiss him, he remained constant in her thoughts. Being with him this weekend made her realize how lonely she'd been. How isolated she lived her life. But that could not be avoided, she reasoned, if she intended to keep the promise she made to God as a child. And her sanity.

When Pam’s six-year-old brother contracted leukemia, Pam spent every possible moment with him. She stayed with him at the hospital and at home, helping him through the side effects of the treatments. And each night she prayed continuously that if God spared his life and cured him, she promised to devote her life to becoming a doctor and helping to cure all the other sick people in the world. Miraculously, God heard her.

After more than a year of treatment, Jason went into remission. Later, the doctors said he was cured. Pam turned twelve at the time and began her medical studies by buying a medical dictionary and memorizing its contents.

And her brother? He was now a happy and healthy computer geek, living in Seattle with his beautiful wife and two-year-old daughter.

Ironically, Pam reaffirmed her promise to God while recovering from her injuries from the accident. This time she asked God to forgive her for her actions and promised to devote her life to saving people in emergency situations, like Megan and Ryan Collins.

Thankfully, God again heard her and gave her back her life, including the mental capabilities she’d lost in the crash. He also reaffirmed her knack for medicine. For that, she felt truly grateful. To her, it came automatically. Like breathing. And could not be ignored. Under the circumstances, losing the lower half of one leg seemed like such a small price to pay. But how could she possibly fulfill that promise to God and take care of a husband and children?

I’m such a fool, Pam admonished, while the hot water from the shower pelted her back. It was stupid to let down her resolve this weekend and fantasize about a future. Not to mention how Tom would feel about her if he discovered the whole truth about the accident.

The horrid message on the mirror made it clear to Pam that someone else knew the devastating secret she’d been hiding. If she returned to Middleton, eventually it would come out. Carrying around the guilt of that night was awful enough. Just the thought of Tom’s rejection made her ill. So, she’d done what the author of the message directed. She left. And she refused to return.

“Please God,” she begged. “Please let this be the end of it. And please heal those I have hurt.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Seventeen

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. We will be arriving at Logan International Airport in approximately eighteen minutes. Please fasten your seat belts. Flight attendants, prepare to land.”

“It’s about time,” Tom mumbled. His fingers itched to use the phone on the headrest in front of him. He’d already tried calling Pam three times, in Newark. Each time he let it ring at least a dozen times, but she didn’t pick up. Nor did he reach an answering machine to leave a message.

Once on the ground, he dialed directory assistance for Boston Community Hospital. The staff nurse told him Pam wasn’t expected until seven the next morning. He then considered calling her parents, before he remembered Pam saying they had left a few days earlier on a cruise. Besides, even if he did reach them, what could he say?

Frustrated, yet still determined, Tom rented a car and followed the directions he’d received to the address listed on Pam’s résumé. It took him over an hour to find it. He spent another ten minutes ringing the doorbell. Fearful of drawing attention to himself, he finally left.

Where are you, Pam? Tom wanted to shout. He stared out at the dark and mostly deserted streets. Starving, he grabbed a bite to eat at an all-night diner and then miserably checked into a Holiday Inn. Thankfully the clerk at the rental car office had been right. As promised, Pam’s hospital was only a block away.

At precisely seven the following morning, Tom approached the desk nurse outside the entrance to the emergency department at the hospital. He’d spent a dismal night tossing and turning and redialing Pam’s number in the hope that she’d answer. No such luck. At six-thirty, he drove past her condo, hoping to see her when she left for work. But she didn’t appear and he didn’t know what kind of car she drove. Before heading to the ED, he checked out the doctors’ lounge. It was empty.

“Will you please page Dr. Pam Harrington?” he asked the desk nurse. It took all his control to sound pleasant, instead of grumpy, discouraged and somewhat annoyed.

“Sure.” The young nurse reached for a clipboard. “I saw her here earlier this morning. Let me check this new paging list. It’s just been updated.”

Tom breathed a sigh of relief. Thank God she's here. Then seeing the woman's altered expression, his stomach sunk.

"Oh."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing really," she assured him. "But I just remembered Dr. Harrington is currently out of the building. She's lecturing at a seminar this morning. Are you a patient? I can take a message. Or maybe you could see one of the other doctors here."

"Oh." He frowned. "I thought she was on the ED schedule for seven." Then he shook his head. "Sorry. It doesn't matter."

The woman gave him a sympathetic smile. "There must have been a mix-up. Would you like to leave her a message?"

Tom shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm a friend of hers from out of town. Could you give me directions to the seminar? Maybe I can catch her there."

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Pam felt Tom's presence the moment he entered the large, crowded auditorium. All at once, her heart pounded. Her forehead and palms dampened. She clenched her hands in her lap. Thank goodness she sat behind a long table covered with a floor-length tablecloth. Otherwise, everyone would notice her trembling legs.

As the first speaker began his presentation, she watched him find a seat up front near the center aisle. He had every right to be angry, she conceded. Then again, she wasn't sure anger accurately described his unreadable expression. Whatever he felt, he was entitled. After all, she did just up and leave. And yes, her departing voice mail message sounded lame. Clearly, he agreed. Otherwise, why would he have made the trip?

Busying her hands with the materials in front of her, Pam continued to catch glimpses of Tom through veiled lashes. If the circumstances weren't so dire, she would have smiled. There he sat, settled back in the theater-style reclining chair, resting an ankle on his opposite knee. He leaned one elbow on the armrest and held a pen in his hand. He looked ready to take notes.

Pam almost laughed out loud. Give me a break. Yes, he fit in perfectly among the hundreds of attendees, but it was all an act. Though she suspected he possessed a genius level IQ, Tom Jarrod was not a man to sit still for a lecture, especially not inside a windowless auditorium crammed

with pompous physicians and medical students. And yet, there he was. Only a few hundred yards away.

Tom gave her a small wave, his expression proud, as if saying, “Hi, I’m here.”

The action set off a dozen butterflies fluttering around in her stomach. She raised her eyes and half-met the pleased-as-a-peacock-smile he now offered. Oh, brother.

Pam always associated Tom with Middleton. He and that place were inseparable. Like food and water. Oxygen and carbon dioxide. But now, seeing him in this light, on her turf, so to speak, she realized she felt even more attracted to him. How much more awful could this get?

Dressed in jeans, a tweed jacket and boots, Tom looked like the majority of the males surrounding him. If only they could live here, together, she thought to herself. In Boston. Or Chicago. Or anywhere in the world. Anywhere but Middleton.

Then reality bit her in the butt. She lowered her eyes in despair. Tom’s life was in Middleton. His children and his job needed him there. A move like that would be disastrous. And even if they could change the setting, the other circumstances remained the same. Yes, it was an accident. Of course she didn’t intend to hurt anybody. But that didn’t erase the result. And someone didn’t intend to let her forget it.

Why did you come? She wanted to demand. Can’t you see? It just won’t work. She’d hoped he’d realized from her hasty departure that she found the past just too painful. Obviously he did not.

Hearing her name introduced, Pam stood and took the podium, thankful when the automatic pilot switched on in her brain. Regardless of the recent events and relentless agony in her heart, she persevered. Medicine was her life. It was all she knew: her passion and her penance.

Pam’s lecture lasted two hours. She answered questions during the remaining time allotted. Though completely immersed in the subject matter, she could feel the moment of reckoning approaching.

At noon, the moderator dismissed the crowd for lunch.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. We’ll reconvene at one-thirty.”

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Eighteen

Pam forced her hand to remain steady. She reached for the doorknob that led into the small office she used whenever she presented at seminars here at the medical school.

“Here. Let me.” Placing his hand over hers, Tom turned the knob and pushed open the door.

His touch felt warm. Strong, yet tender. He held her there, longer than necessary. For an instant, she stared at their hands, unable or unwilling to pull away. Then she broke the connection and entered the room.

“So, what do you think of Boston?” Listening to herself, Pam cringed at the insane question. She turned on an overhead light, then placed her folder on the desk and turned to face him.

Tom followed, closed the door behind him and leaned against it. He cast her a half dubious, half humorous gaze. “Oh, well. I love all the traffic lights. And all those one-way signs. The civil engineers must have had a good time mapping out the routes. Mixed with the smog and cars jamming every inch of the roads and sidewalks, it’s truly amazing how everybody manages to get where they’re going alive.”

“You rented a car?” Again a dumb question, but it slipped out before she could hold it back. “Boston is horrible to drive around if you don’t know your way.”

Tom furrowed his brows. “Gee. That explains why people kept yelling at me and honking their horns everywhere I went.”

Playing along, Pam said, “That could be it.”

“But I liked it better than that thing you call the T. Back where I come from, people drive on the road. Not under it.”

Pam gave him a sad smile. There was nothing “small place” about Thomas Jarrod, regardless of what he said. But the effect seemed to steady them both. She noted a slight glimmer returning to his eyes. She motioned him to a chair.

He shook his head. “No, thanks. I think I’ll just stand here by the door in case you try to make a run for it again.”

Realizing he was somewhat serious, Pam settled on a small couch facing him. Though still distraught, the earthquakes erupting inside her now reduced themselves to aftershocks. “I’m sorry,” she said, meeting his gaze.

Tom continued to watch her, then she noticed the corners of his mouth twitch into a semi smile. He nodded. “I’d like to hope that you thought you had a good reason for leaving like that.”

“I did. I still do.”

He left his post and joined her on the couch. Stretching his legs straight out, he placed one arm around her shoulder and used his free hand to reach for hers. Quietly, they sat there.

Pam knew she should move away but she found it impossible to ignore the nearness he offered. It will be over soon enough, she reasoned. A few more minutes together couldn’t change anything. Then they could both go back to their lives. After all, they’d both been on their own all this time and done quite well for themselves. Surely, they could survive a lifetime.

She felt his thumb gently trace small circles on the top of her hand. “You’re not making this very easy.”

“Good. I don’t intend to.” Patient and firm, he sounded like he had all the time in the world.

“You know it won’t work.”

“Says you.”

Pam straightened, but he kept his hold in place. She fought the urge to fall back into his arms and lose herself in his embrace. Instead, she prayed silently. Please, Lord. Give me the right words to say. Make him understand that we’re just not meant to be. Yes, I loved seeing him again. And I’m flattered that we could still hold a torch for each other. Thank you for that. But it can’t go any further. Otherwise, who knows how far that person in Middleton will go to expose me?

“Where do you suggest I start looking for an apartment?”

“What?” Her eyes widened with confusion. What did he say?

Tom shrugged. “I’ve decided I need a change of scenery. You seem to like it here, so it can’t be all that bad. Or are we going to Chicago? Isn’t that what you said in your message? I’m sure I could get a job there. Or here. It’s up to you.”

Pam fought the tiny gleam of hope she felt burning through the darkness of their situation. She stood and faced him. “You don’t mean that. I mean, you can’t mean that. What about your farm? The medical center? Your sons?”

Tom’s eyes hardened when she mentioned his children. “Let’s just say none of that is an issue. Where would we stand if I were to join you,

wherever you decide to go?”

Pam could only stare at him.

“Do I have any chance at all with you?”

Pam crinkled her forehead. “Excuse me?”

He rose to his feet and again took her hands. “Hypothetically speaking, if we lived in the same city, excluding Middleton, and I asked you out on a date, would you accept?”

“Hypothetically?”

“Yes.”

She faltered. “That’s dumb,” she answered finally. “You’re not moving, and I don’t like fantasies.”

Tom moved closer and tightened his grip on Pam’s hands. She could smell the pleasant fragrance of his aftershave and feel the warmth of his body radiating toward her. Move away, her thoughts warned. But her heart resisted and seemed to take over her body.

Seductively, he lowered his voice. “What’s your answer?”

Suddenly, Pam felt very vulnerable. She looked up at the ceiling to avoid his eyes and bit her lip to keep it from quivering. Yes, she wanted to say. But it doesn’t matter. It will never work. And I just can’t bear one more disappointment.

Tom pulled her closer to him and smoothed her hair. “What’s worrying you?” he whispered. “I thought you told me everything. About your leg, your crazy idea that you caused the accident. What else could there be? What’s making you run away from me?”

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Nineteen

Tom meant what he said about relocating. He'd spent the majority of the night in his hotel room trying to make sense of the weekend's events. He refused to believe that God would simply throw him and Pam together, just for old time's sake, only to tear them apart.

Pam was the part of him that had been missing all these years. She was, in essence, the answer to his prayers. He realized that the moment he saw her standing there Thursday afternoon, at the burning factory with T.J., asking where she could help. If the problem was Middleton itself, and if she couldn't find a way to bury the ghosts she'd left behind there, then he'd find a way to make the move to keep them together.

He heard Pam sniffle and felt her pull away from him.

"I've got no right to cry," she told him. "Please don't feel sorry for me."

Tom noticed a box of tissues on the desk behind them. He reached for one and used it to wipe away the tears falling down her cheeks.

"Are you upset with me?" he asked softly. "Because I wasn't there for you during your recovery?" He looked down and shifted his weight. "I still feel like such a jerk about that. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Pam shook her head. "Don't be. It's over."

"You're being much too easy on me. It's making me feel even worse."

Pam reached for him and held him tight. It felt so right to be in her arms. If he could only figure out what was bothering her. Then a thought struck him. Directly in the gut. Because this was one thing he would not be able to fix.

"Pam?"

"Hm?"

He felt beads of sweat form on his upper lip. He exhaled, his breath coming out staggered. He may as well get it over with. "Is it the divorce?"

Seeming surprised, Pam held him at arms length. The look in her eyes allowed him to sigh with relief. "Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"Because a lot of people are sensitive about stuff like that. 'Marriage is for better or for worse.'"

"Yeah, but those people need a reality check. And aren't they lucky that their lives are so perfect they can't be sympathetic to someone else's misfortune."

Tom tightened his hold on her. “Boy, where were you when I needed you years ago? The gossip around town was unbelievable.”

“Oh, no!” she laughed. “That would have been awful! They’d think I caused your breakup and have plenty of reasons to talk then.”

“Yeah, well. Susan gave them enough reason of her own.” That’s for sure. Tom hadn’t told Pam about the events leading to the divorce. He would, but so far he didn’t want to waste time rehashing the past. He wanted a future. With Pam.

Tom spent a moment formulating his next horrid question. This one was more delicate than the one before. “If it’s not the divorce, then, well, are you really okay with what happened back then? I mean my reason for marrying Susan?”

Serious faced, Pam cleared her throat, but he caught a twinkle in her eyes. “Lucky for you, I guess I’m not the jealous type.” Then she flashed him a semi-dark glare. “Not that it wasn’t a bone of contention back then. I was totally heartbroken.”

He felt somewhat relieved but still irked. He raised her chin so that their eyes met. “So why won’t you let me make it up to you?”

The question came out in a whisper but contained the impact of an avalanche. He watched as Pam’s eyes widened and face flushed. She recoiled from him, wrapping her arms around her middle.

“It’s the accident. Isn’t it?” Tom confirmed. He’d always considered the horrendous tragedy simply that, a tragedy. But to Pam, he realized, it was so much more. “Then it’s settled. There are too many memories for you in Middleton. So, I’ll move.”

A long silence followed. Tom had said his piece. Now it was up to her. Please Lord, he prayed. If we’re meant to be together, help me. I’ve made lots of mistakes. I don’t want to make any more, and I don’t want to add losing her to the list.

“I know what you said. And I appreciate your support, but I still believe it was my fault.”

Jolted from his thoughts, Tom looked up and saw Pam’s wild eyes. He took a step to her, but she backed away from him like a cornered animal. Bewildered, he said, “Okay. Let me think.”

In a flash, he recalled that night’s events. “As long as I live I will never forget hearing that call over the radio. Your Ford Escort. The other driver’s station wagon. When I got to the scene I couldn’t believe all that shattered

glass. And crushed metal. I was just so thankful you survived. It was a miracle." He blocked out the memories and reached for her.

"But why did I?" Pam's face contorted with anguish. "I was drinking that night." She held up three fingers. "I had three beers. Even if Ryan was drunk, if I hadn't been drinking too, I should have been able to avoid him. Don't you see? If anyone had to die, it should have been me. Not Megan!"

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty

There. She finally said it. With the words came a tidal wave of emotions she'd been harboring for more than a third of her lifetime. Salty tears, filled with shame, gagged her throat and stung her cheeks.

Tom continued to stare at her with disbelief. It was nice of him to offer to leave Middleton, but now that he knew the truth, she was sure that was no longer an option. She held her breath, waiting for him to shake his head in revolution and walk out the door.

"Have you seen the pictures?" he asked. "Did you read the accident reconstruction report?"

Placing her hands on her hips, Pam paced the length of the small room. He just didn't get it. "Yes. I saw them. But they're not right. Something is wrong. I can't explain it. The accident itself is all a blank to me. The last thing I remember is Megan and me walking to the car. I felt upset. Susan's sister had just made her announcement about the baby, and Megan suggested we leave the party."

Pam raised her hands to her head, wanting to pull at her hair in frustration. "I think I blocked it out because I don't want to face the truth."

"That's when you found out?"

Tom's stricken expression made her freeze. Puzzled, she furrowed her brows.

"About the baby. You found out at the cast party?"

Now Pam felt confused. She stepped toward him. He really didn't know what happened that night. She sighed. "Look Tom. It doesn't matter. Like you said, it happened a long time ago. I'm sorry that I can't seem to be able to put it behind me. I thought I did. But now…I just can't. I'm sorry, but it's not going to work. Please. Just leave."

"No."

The matter-of-fact tone of his voice caught her attention. She turned to face him. "Excuse me?"

"I said no. I can't let you go on taking the blame for something that wasn't your fault. Even if you did drink, you were upset. That was my fault. As for the accident, I swear to you, it was unavoidable. And I refuse to let it end our future together."

Pam had no more fight left in her. All these years, she'd kept that secret bottle up, refusing to discuss it with anyone. Even her aunt didn't know. Yes, she admitted to herself, her guilt was the drive behind her passion for perfection. Her passion to make up for causing the death of Megan and the boy she didn't know by excelling in her field. A psychiatrist might call it her self-imposed sentence. In a way, she feared the doctors were right about her mind's need to block out the accident. If her memory surfaced, it would only confirm her own negligence.

They stood by the window for several minutes. Pam leaned against him in order to remain upright. At this point, nothing mattered.

"I know you were unconscious for more than a week. I presumed that when the swelling in your brain subsided, anything you lost, you'd get back. I didn't realize you lost your memory."

"The doctors still aren't sure if it's part of the brain damage or if it's traumatic amnesia. I managed to relearn everything else I'd lost. But this one piece is still missing."

"I can understand why you didn't come back, even to visit. But what made you leave last night without telling me?"

Pam paled, and pulled away again.

"Don't stop now, Pam. Please," Tom implored.

Taking a breath, she weighed her options. Should she tell him? What did it matter? It was over. She wasn't going back.

"I need to know. We owe that to each other. So please. Tell me!"

"All right!" She paused and faced him. "I'm not the only one who thinks I was at fault."

Tom blanched. "What do you mean?"

Pam told him about the mirror.

"What!" Now it was his turn to pace the room. "That's ludicrous! Where's the article now?"

Her eyes darted to her briefcase, sitting in the corner. Tom followed her gaze.

"Can I get it?" Tom asked.

She hesitated. Then nodded.

Numb, she watched him find the crumpled page.

"I remember this." He studied the depicted scene, then looked to Pam. "There is nothing in there to even remotely suggest you were responsible." Slowly, he approached her. "Please, Pam, listen to me. I'm sure they drew

your blood at the hospital. I would have heard something if there was even a question about you being drunk. And even if you somehow lost control of the car, the crash was not your fault. You did not kill Megan and Collins. It was an accident. Do you hear me?"

Pam searched his eyes. She really wanted to believe him, but something still held her back.

"And as for the message on the mirror." He made a formidable face. "That's just downright sick. When I get back, I'm going to find out who's responsible."

"No!" Pam insisted, more afraid than before. "It's over. Please don't dredge up the past."

"Why? Its clear someone else wants to. I know I wasn't around for you then. But I'm here now. I mean it, Pam. I love you. I always have and I should have told you before. I promise you. I'm going to get to the bottom of this, and quick."

"Please don't," she cried, fighting the panic that was threatening to overwhelm her. "Even if you're right, someone still blames me for what happened, and they went to a lot of trouble to make sure I knew. I…I can't go back there."

Tom gripped her shoulders. "Did you hear what I said? I love you!"

"And what if you do reopen the investigation?" she challenged. "And you realize I'm right. What then? You're telling me you'd still want to be with..." She swallowed. Her throat felt so raw but she forced the words out. "A murderer?"

She could barely say it. To her, it conjured up every horrible image of self-loathing she'd been running from since waking out of the coma and learning of Megan's and that boy's deaths.

Years later, each time she saved a life, it felt like a point toward redemption. When she lost one, it was a reminder of her sins, failures, proof of her worthlessness.

"Yes."

Skeptical, she smirked at him.

"The answer is yes," he confirmed again.

Pam scowled. "Right."

"Hey," he smiled, shrugging his broad shoulders. "Then we both goofed up. That makes us even."

“Oh I’m sure God will love that. I can just see us at the pearly gates. An angel watches us approaching and frowns. “Oh, dear. You two? Sorry. No admittance.”

Somehow, the mood had lightened.

“Don’t change the subject,” he demanded. “I’m going to ask you again, once and for all. Do you love me?”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty-One

Hearing the passion and conviction in Tom's voice, seeing the strength and determination in his eyes, Pam felt her heart ache to cry out, Yes! Instead, she forced herself to accept the hopelessness of the situation. She gave him only a single nod.

He grabbed her in a huge hug. "Then say it! Say it out loud!"

For a fraction of a second everything stilled. Then, suddenly feeling lightheaded and giddy, she whispered, "Yes."

"Yes what?" The corners of Tom's mouth curved. His blue eyes shimmered.

"Yes. I love you."

He pulled her in a tight embrace. "See. Now that wasn't too hard. Was it?"

****

Pam unlocked the door to her condo a little after seven the next evening.

"Yeah, Bill. It's Tom." She overheard Tom say into the phone. He was speaking to Middleton's deputy police chief.

"Thanks for getting back to me. I'm looking to locate an old file. Yeah. Fourteen years old, to be specific. Remember back then, that fatal car crash involving the three teenagers?"

Too familiar with the details, Pam headed to her bedroom to change. That part was out of her hands now. Tom had insisted on opening up the case. Reluctantly, she relented. On the condition that it be kept quiet. On top of everything else, she loathed being referred to as the lone survivor of "that horrible accident."

Tom met her with a huge hug when she returned to the living room. Enjoying the feel of him, so close, she marveled at how comfortable it felt for him to be there. With her, in her home.

After a passionate kiss, he led her to the couch. "Hey. Look what I found." He pointed to a pile of books on the coffee table.

Pam read a few titles out loud. "Hypnosis or Hocus Pocus? Memory Recall, Using Hypnosis to Unlock Your Subconscious." She shot him a skeptical look. "Please tell you me you're joking."

Tom diverted his gaze to the ceiling, the floor, the corner. Then back to her, flashing a wide grin.

Suspicious, Pam narrowed her eyes. “Thomas Jarrod! What did you do?”

“I told Bill Houser everything. He thinks it became a police matter the minute someone broke into your hotel room.”

“Okay, but…”

He took her face in his hands and peered into her eyes. “Trust me?”

An interesting question. She wanted to trust him. She arched an eyebrow. “Maybe. But…”

“Good. And no buts. I also spoke with Rebecca, Eddie’s wife. She read something in one of her medical psychology books about your condition. It’s not unusual. Lots of victims and folks who witness crimes can’t recall specific details. Hypnosis can help unlock the memories. Here. Take a look a these case studies.” He placed an open book in front of her. “Some are very similar to yours. And they’ve had great success.”

Pam felt a lump rise to her throat. It burned from the bile churning upward from her gut, threatening to cut off her air supply. Her premonition about that day of reckoning was quickly turning into a reality. If she said no to Tom’s idea, there could be no hope for a normal life together. It wouldn’t matter where they decided to live.

On the other hand, did she really want to relive the whole horrible experience again? She shivered. Because it went deeper than that. And she felt really guilty about it. But in fact, did she really want to know the truth? It was one thing for her to think she caused it. It would be a whole other story to know for sure.

Her head ached with confusion. Was that message in the hotel bathroom just a sick joke? she wondered. A one-time occurrence? Or was it really a warning for her to stay away from Middleton?

“So, what do you think?” Tom asked, eager and excited.

The phone rang before she could answer.

She stuck out her tongue at him and rose to find the cordless phone. “Momentarily saved by the bell. It’s probably the hospital.”

She found the phone in her bedroom. “Hello?”

“June 25, 1994.”

“Excuse me?” Pam’s heart started to pound.

“June 25, 1994,” a raspy voice repeated. Then the line went dead.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Was that the hospital, Pam? Did they call you in?”

Tom knew she was on-call that night. When she didn’t answer, he found her sitting on the edge of the bed, her face blank, white and unreadable. He ran to her. “It’s okay, honey. You look like you’re in shock. Tell me what happened. Is it a patient? Your family?”

“It was him,” Pam whispered

“What? Who?”

Slowly, still whispering, she repeated the message. “He said, ‘June 25, 1994.’ That’s the date of the accident.”

Tom jumped to his feet and disconnected the phone. Inside, his emotions raged. The situation had gone too far. Now this piece of crap decided to call her at home? Then, seeing Pam’s almost detached reaction, he forced himself to keep his voice calm. Sitting next to her he asked, “Did you recognize anything about his voice? His tone?”

Dazed, Pam shook her head.

“And nothing like this has happened before? Ever?”

“No. What do you think he wants?”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to find out. First, we’re going to convince you that the accident wasn’t your fault. Then, we’ll take care of nailing this nut.”

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“Are you ready?” Tom asked.

They sat in his rented Taurus, parked outside a gothic-looking structure that was supposedly the office of a Dr. Roger DeOreo. It was located in the historic district of Salem, Massachusetts.

Pam stared straight ahead, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Their appointment was for eight o’clock. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Tom check his watch.

“It’s seven-fifty-five.”

Pam scowled. “The place looks haunted.”

“Well, Halloween’s in two weeks. It looks like they go all out around here.”

She scowled again. “It’s still creepy. What did you say this guy is?”

“DeOreo?”

She turned to face him, arching an irritated eyebrow.

Fortunately, Tom had a good sense of humor. He stuck out his tongue at her, then said, “He’s a psychiatrist. An MD just like you. And a hypnotherapist.”

“A hypnotherapist?” she repeated.

Tom gave her a proud grin. “Board certified.”

She grunted. “How lucky for him.” Digesting the information, she wondered what her colleagues would have to say on the subject. “Don’t you think it’s a little weird that he lives here, in the witch capital of the country?”

Tom grinned and messed her hair. “The psychologist at the Boston police department assured me that he’s really good. He does a lot of this kind of work with them. Sometimes it’s to help someone describe a face. Other times it’s to remember an event.”

“Uh-huh.” Pam looked back at the gothic building. It resembled a miniature version of Notre Dame. She searched the eaves and corners for gargoyles.

“Look.”

She turned back to Tom.

He gave her a Boy Scout salute. “Scouts honor. If you don’t like him, we can leave. Okay?”

Pam sighed and cast him a grateful smile. “At ease, soldier. And please, don’t think I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do. I really do. It’s just that…”

“It’s just that you’re afraid of what you’re going to find out,” he finished.

She frowned. “It really bugs me that you can read me so well. Am I that transparent?”

Gently, Tom brushed her bangs away from her face. “No, silly. I just love you. And you love me. We’ve clicked from the beginning, Pam. You can’t deny it.”

He was right. They did click. From the beginning. Sure they’d been young. But even back then, he was the one person she didn’t need to explain anything to. He just understood. That’s why hearing about Susan’s pregnancy had devastated her. He’d become such a force in her life. Then, without warning, she’d lost him.

Pam sighed. And here he was again. They'd been given a gift. A second chance. It would be foolish to blow it now.

Armed with that resolve, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Let's get this over with."

Hand in hand, they walked to the door. A well built man in his mid-sixties, with a full head of snow white hair, responded to the bell.

"You must be Dr. Harrington," he said kindly, "And Mr. Jarrod. Please come in."

Entering the hall, Pam felt relieved to see this guy wearing gray flannel pants, a maroon cardigan and black wingtips. Though she tried to avoid judging people solely on appearances, a shaved head, numerous body piercings and a red velvet robe would have significantly shaken her confidence.

"I'd like Tom to be there when you hyp...hypnotize me."

"That's fine," the doctor assured her. "He and I spoke about it when he called me to make the appointment."

Tom squeezed Pam's hand as they followed the doctor through a long hall. He led them into a comfortable, darkly furnished office and motioned for them to sit on an antique loveseat, upholstered in ivory velvet.

"Now then." DeOreo sat in a black leather chair across from them. "I'd like to start by Pam telling me what brings you both here today."

Involuntarily, Pam felt herself tense. Her throat tightened, making it impossible to utter a sound. The room seemed unbearably stuffy. Almost suffocating. The only illumination came from an old-fashioned brass lamp with a red fringed shade, located on top of the desk and a floor lamp in the far corner.

"Would you like some water?" DeOreo didn't wait for a reply. Instead, he poured her a glass from a crystal carafe set up on a serving cart to his left.

Pam took the glass. "Thank you." She wrapped both hands around it. Staring into the water, she silently prayed for help. Then plunged ahead. "In June of 1994..." Her voice faltered. She looked at Tom and, in his eyes, found the courage to continue. "My best friend, Megan Fitzgerald, died in a car accident. I was driving. The boy in the other car died, too."

"The cops listed him as the cause," Tom added. "He was eighteen and dangerously intoxicated."

Pam watched DeOreo nod, then direct his gaze to her. “But you’re not convinced?”

“I’m not sure.” She paused, swallowing hard to help keep her voice even. “I’d been drinking, too.” The sentence hung in the air like a hammer coming straight at her.

“But you weren’t drunk,” Tom chimed in. “And I don’t recall any evidence linking you and alcohol in any of the reports.”

Pam listened, praying he was right, but she couldn’t be sure. She placed the glass of water on a small table and crinkled her forehead. She tried hard to remember, but the images were so scattered and blurred.

To both men she said, “I’m certain there was beer at the party. I remember seeing the other kids drinking. And…” It killed her to say this. But she had to. Otherwise, nothing in her life would improve. “I’m pretty sure I did, too.”

“But you don’t know for sure?” DeOreo asked.

Pam shook her head. “After the crash, it took me three months to understand what had happened. I had head injuries and needed a couple of surgeries. When I finally saw the photographs of the accident and read all the reports, they didn’t make any sense to me. They didn’t seem real. It felt like it must have happened to someone else.”

Exhausted, she rested her elbows on her thighs and raked her hands through her hair. “I’ve always had this nagging feeling that something just isn’t right. Like a huge piece of the puzzle is missing.” Sitting up again, she studied the antique wall tapestries, hanging behind DeOreo’s desk.

“I’m not a martyr. I’ve read all about survivor’s guilt. That’s not why I blame myself.” Shaking her head in despair, she added, “I know it sounds crazy. Who knows? Maybe I am crazy.”

“I doubt very much that you are,” DeOreo replied, repositioning himself in the chair. “What’s happened recently to make you want to find out the truth now?”

Pam deferred to Tom to explain.

“I see,” DeOreo commented, when Tom finished. He jotted down some notes. “That’s certainly disturbing. I’m glad you notified the police.”

“The nasty call to Pam’s condo came up restricted on the caller ID,” Tom said. “Now the line is tapped. If he tries again, we should get him.”

“Good. Now then. Let’s go over some of the details Tom gave me earlier. Time, place, et cetera, so I can get an accurate picture. Then we’ll

get started."

Pam felt Tom reach for her hand. "And remember," he whispered, peering into her frightened eyes. "No matter what, it was an accident. Nothing will change how I feel about you. We're going to catch this person who's bothering you and put a stop to this crap. Okay?"

Oh, how she really needed to hear him say that. And how she wanted to believe him. After a moment, she nodded to him, then to DeOreo.

It took only a few minutes to review the information needed. When they finished, DeOreo put down his pen and smiled at Pam. "Good. Settle back in the recliner and get comfortable."

Once she was ready, he said, "Now, close your eyes and try to relax. Envision all your stress working its way toward your fingers and toes. At your command, tell it to leave your body."

Pam did as she was instructed. She was familiar with such relaxation techniques. She'd used them, along with meditation and prayer, to help her deal with all the pain she'd experienced during rehab. Later, in college and med school, she used them again to help with her heavy course load and exams.

After a few moments, she heard DeOreo say, "I want you to tell me what you remember about June 25, 1994."

Fighting the panic, Pam told him about the play, followed by the cast party and Jennifer Murphy's announcement about Tom and Susan. Then, getting into the car with Megan.

"Excellent. What happened next?"

"I woke up in the hospital."

"Fine. Now let's go back to earlier in the day. I want you to picture yourself on stage. What was the name of the play?"

"The Sound of Music."

Feeling herself being transferred back in time, Pam saw herself singing with Wayne Wagner, a fellow senior.

"What role did you play?"

"The captain's eldest daughter. We just finished singing 'Sixteen Going on Seventeen.'"

"And after the play you went to the party?"

"Yes."

"How did you get there?"

"I drove my car."

“How is the party?”

“Fine. We know almost everybody there.”

“What time is it?”

“My watch says a little after eleven.”

“Let me know when Jennifer shows up.”

“She’s there. I can overhear her conversation about Tom and Susan.” She repeated it for DeOreo.

“What are you doing at this time?”

“I’m talking to Megan and some of the other kids.”

“Look at your face. What is your expression?”

“My face is red. And my eyes are glassy. I look like I’m trying not to cry.”

“So you were upset.”

Pam nodded. “Very. But I couldn’t show it.”

“Look in your hands. Are you holding anything?”

She paused, afraid to look but too curious not to. “I’m holding a green can.”

“Try to read the label,” DeOreo urged.

“I can’t. Megan is leading me out of the party. We’re going up the stairs outside. To my car.”

“Okay. As you leave, try to look around the room. Do you see other green cans?”

“Yes. Lots of them. And other kinds of cans.”

“Do you see their colors?”

It was hard to tell. Megan was practically pushing her out the door. “I think there are red ones. And blue ones too. Also a lot of brown bottles.”

“Are you holding a brown bottle?”

“No. But…”

“Were you drinking from a brown bottle?”

“No.”

“So you and Megan leave?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of car do you have?”

“A bright yellow Escort.”

“Good. Picture you and Megan in the car driving. Describe the road.”

Pam flinched. “Very dark. Narrow. Hard to see. The rain is coming down hard. Sharp curves, deep ditches and pot holes...”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Tom.” She clenched her hands. Her chest hurt, fearful of where he might be.

“What are you feeling?”

“Embarrassed. H-humiliated. I thought he really cared about me. I can’t believe he cheated on me like that.”

“Are you crying?”

Hot tears flowed down her cheeks. “Yes.”

“Where are you driving to?”

“Home. To call him.”

“Did you ever get there?”

Beads of perspiration formed on her forehead. “No.”

Then, for no apparent reason, Pam heard herself scream. It was a loud, piercing, blood curdling cry, drenched with anguish.

Truths Unveiled

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Chapter Twenty-Three

“Wake up, Pam!” Dr. DeOreo commanded. “Nothing can hurt you. You’re safe.”

She opened her eyes and gasped for air.

“It’s okay, honey.” Tom bent down next to the recliner and held her.

After a few minutes, Pam felt her heartbeat returning to normal. Sitting back now, she saw his distraught expression. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, he features etched with guilt. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

Pam closed her eyes and exhaled. “I know. I guess what made it so hard was that I expected you to be at the play. I didn’t know where you were.”

DeOreo handed Pam a cassette. “This is a copy of what just transpired. You can listen to it later.”

Pam put the tape in her purse, then accepted the glass of water Tom offered. The cool liquid soothed her dry, raw throat.

“Are you ready to talk?” DeOreo asked, returning to his chair.”

“I want to tell Pam where I was that night,” Tom informed him, still subdued.

“Go on.”

“After work, I met up with my friend, Eddie Cartwright. We got a quick bite to eat before Pam’s play. He told me he overhead something about Susan, now my former wife. She was going around telling everybody we were getting married. That definitely wasn’t the truth, at least at the time, so I invited myself over to her house, intending to put a stop to her nonsense.”

Tom paused. Pam could tell he was visualizing the events in his mind.

“When I arrived, she told me she was pregnant.”

“What did you do next?” DeOreo asked. If he was passing judgment, his expression didn’t betray it.

Tom looked to Pam. His usually bright eyes filled with anguish and shame. “The situation got out of hand. Her parents came into the room. There was a lot of yelling. Most of it came from me and her father. I just couldn’t believe it. I mean, yes, we had sex, but like I already told you the other night, Pam, that was before you and I stated dating. And Susan was certainly no Snow White. It was no secret she was seeing other guys along with me. She’d told me she started taking birth control pills when she

turned fifteen. Sure we knew about HIV, but…" He shook his head. "Anyway, neither of us saw any reason to use condoms."

"Susan named you the father?" DeOreo asked.

Tom released a deep breath. "Yes." He stood and paced the long wooden floorboards. "I couldn't get out of there until after midnight. I knew about the cast party. I planned to meet up with you there," he told Pam. "Then I heard about the accident over my scanner. I remember getting a sick feeling in my gut, even before the dispatcher mentioned your car."

DeOreo cleared his throat. "Pam, do you have any more questions for Tom about what happened before the accident?"

Tom's hooded eyes implored her forgiveness. She offered him a small but genuine smile and shook her head. He reclaimed her hand and kissed it.

"Very well. Then I'll presume the two of you have settled that issue between you. Now, tell us Pam, what made you scream?"

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Pam's breath caught in her throat. Without realizing it, she dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands. How stupid of her. She'd almost forgotten why they were here. Maybe the mellowed feeling she'd experienced moments ago came from her needing to hear Tom's side of the story more than she'd realized. His explanation went a long way to fill in the blanks, but she didn't feel comfortable asking him anything more than he was willing to volunteer.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," DeOreo reminded her. "Take it one scene at a time. Close your eyes, if you think it will help."

Pam took the suggestion. "It was very dark. The road was slippery. The rain wouldn't let up. I remember driving slower than usual because it was so difficult to see. Megan and I were talking about Tom and Susan. I was trying not to cry. We were going downhill, around a curve surrounded by huge trees and woods."

Pam paused. She could feel her heart pounding against her ribs.

"There was no warning. Not even headlights. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, something smashed into us." She placed her hands over her ears. "The noise. It went on forever. And I couldn't see anything!"

Her upper chest and neck, and her chin, began to throb as she recalled the impact against the steering wheel and dashboard.

"I could hear Megan scream. I couldn't stop the car. Glass shattered. I kept trying to slam on the brakes and maneuver away from the woods, but I couldn't. The car just kept going. I lost complete control. Then, like a flash, I saw an enormous tree coming right at us."

Emotionally spent, Pam collapsed against the back of the recliner.

"Congratulations," the doctor said. "That's a major breakthrough. You forced your subconscious to recall the accident."

Wearily, Pam pulled herself up and walked over to a bronze bust of Chopin sitting on a tall, pedestal table near a heavily draped window. She pretended to examine it.

"I understand what you're saying. But what about the green can I was holding? I can name two types of beer that come in green cans."

"And I can name at least one kind of soda," Dr. DeOreo interjected, playing devil's advocate. "Furthermore, a lot of different kinds of beer

come in brown bottles. You guys were kids. And under age. Chances are you didn't have too much variety of booze. If I were voting, I'd say that the green can was filled with soda."

"Like ginger ale," Tom recalled. "You loved the stuff. I remember you ordering it every time we'd go out."

Pam remembered it, too. She also remembered her mom bringing her a two-liter bottle when she was in the hospital. To their surprise, she had gagged on it and hadn't touched a drop since. Wasn't that weird? Who was she kidding? The whole thing was weird. And being here, getting hypnotized, was even weirder.

She met the gaze of both men. "Okay. I hear you. I guess I'm thinking that if I was drinking, even if I wasn't legally drunk, my reflexes would have been impaired. Therefore, even if there had been some way to avoid Ryan, I wouldn't have been able to think or act fast enough to do it."

"You could be right," DeOreo replied. "But there's more about this, Pam. Isn't there? Something that won't let you let go of it."

"What do you mean?" Tom asked. "Pam?"

It took her a full minute to respond. He was right. Something still irked her. But what? She couldn't put her finger on it. "I don't know. It's more like a feeling, I guess."

"Should we try the hypnosis again?" Tom suggested.

Dr. DeOreo rose and shook his head. "Not at this time. I think you've learned enough for now. Take some time to digest it. And don't be surprised if other details come to you during the next few days."

He opened the office door and led them back to the foyer. Shaking Pam's hand, he said, "Call me next week and let me know how you are. We can schedule another session if you think it could be helpful."

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The following evening, Pam broke away from the hospital at six to join Tom at Cherrystones, one of her favorite restaurants on Boston Harbor. She found him seated at a table on the patio when she arrived.

"Welcome to the life of a physician," she told him apologetically, kissing him lightly on the cheek.

"You'll find no complaints here," Tom assured her.

Dreamily, Pam gazed at the man across from her. He'd charmed his way into her life when she was sixteen. He was her first love and her first heartache. And now, he was still all she could ever want.

Yes, the accident continued to bother her. Specifically that one piece of the puzzle she couldn't find. But for the first time in so long, she felt a little less guilty. Of course now they needed to find the lunatic who was trying to drive her mad. But if God could forgive her, and she prayed every day that He did, and Tom still wanted to stand by her, then maybe everything could work out for them.

Pam directed her attention to Tom.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

He closed the large, leather-bound menu and smiled. "Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking what a beautiful night it is." And it was. The sun had recently set, changing the air to one of those crisp October nights in New England that everyone looks forward to.

After being indoors all day, Pam relished putting on a bulky sweater and sitting outside, overlooking the harbor. Lights inside the nearby waterfront condos clicked on one by one. Early stars popped out high in a sapphire sky. She smiled at Tom and reached for his hand.

"We've been through a lot," he said, after the waiter left with their orders. They bowed their heads and whispered a prayer of thanks before he spread salmon mousse on a water cracker and fed it to her across the table.

"That's for sure."

"I think I could get used to living in Boston."

Pam stopped chewing. Even though he'd made the suggestion before, she'd never considered it a real option. At the same time, the topic reminded them both that their time together was limited. He'd been here five days now. During that time, they'd crammed in a ton of sightseeing and that session with Dr. DeOreo. He'd also gone out exploring on his own while she was working. But there was only so much of that someone could do as a visitor. Tom was accustomed to being kept busy. He shouldered an enormous amount of responsibility, running the farm and the medical center's emergency operations. With dread, the question of his departure, even if temporary, weighed heavily on her mind.

"I'm not kidding about moving here. What are your thoughts on the idea?"

"Your father and your children need you," she said quietly.

Tom shrugged. "We've already talked about that. They'll manage."

Pam pretended not to hear him. She just couldn't see it happening. And yet he seemed completely serious. Should she probe further and risk ruining

what promised to be a wonderful evening or just dismiss the idea? To her surprise, Tom made the decision for her.

“I worked on my résumé this afternoon. Do you think you can give me a reference?”

“Of course,” she answered automatically. “But Tom, hold on a minute. Even if the farm and the hospital are taken care of, there are your sons to consider. They’ll be young for such a short time. You need to be there.”

As she spoke, Pam wondered why he didn’t talk about them more. Did he think she’d resent them for some reason? Why would she? They were part of him. She wanted him to feel free to talk about them, be with them and be their dad.

Pam caught a flash of anguish cross his face. He quickly replaced it with a look of defiant indifference. He reached for a breadstick and bit down. After a second, he said, “I doubt that. I haven’t seen or spoken to them in over two years.”

Pam’s fork slipped through her fingers onto the china plate. She grimaced. “Sorry...about the fork and your kids.” Picking it up, she noticed Tom’s clenched jaw.

“Don’t sweat it. I’ve tried everything. Nothing seems to work.” Uttering a frustrated sigh, he directed his attention to his lobster. “Let’s eat. I’m starved.”

This isn’t good, Pam thought to herself. Tom wasn’t the type of man who would abandon his kids. Something very bad must have happened. She wondered if she should push, then decided against it for now. When the direct approach wasn’t working, sometimes the roundabout route led to better results.

“Why don’t we go to Middleton tomorrow?”

Tom ceased chewing.

Before he could speak, she added, “I’ve got at least a month’s worth of vacation time coming to me. Though I can’t take it all at once, I can manage a few days at a time. And one of the doctors owes me some time. He can cover for me over the weekend. We could leave by five and be there sometime after midnight. That would give us two full days.” And plenty of time for me to talk to Rebecca Cartwright, Pam told herself. I’m sure she must know what’s going on.

Pam could see Tom’s inner wheels turning.

“You can leave tomorrow night?”

“Uh-huh.” Somehow. Hello, Lord, I need a favor. Again.

Thoughtfully, Tom set down his fork and settled back in the chair. He took a drink from the water goblet, then replaced it on the table, folded his hands and rested them on his belt. “Let’s get back to the previous conversation. I don’t think you believe my offer is genuine. But it is. I am totally serious about moving up here to be with you. My folks even anticipated it might happen when I mentioned I’d be seeing you again. They know they can hire people to do the work. And I’m sure one of the ambulance companies either here or in Chicago will take me.” He let out a short laugh. “From what I’ve seen these past few days, they’re certainly busy enough.”

Suddenly, Pam didn’t feel like she was being compelled to give up anything in order to have a relationship with him. Nor did she feel frightened about the culprit who was trying to scare her.

“So what do you think?”

She smiled, hoping he could see the sincerity she felt. “Though I must say I’m surprised, I think I believe you. And I know you could get a job here in a second. I’m just not sure it’s the best solution.”

Tom leaned forward and took both her hands in his. “I can’t lose you again, Pam. And I understand now how hard it is for you to be in Middleton.”

Pam gulped. He was right, of course. “I think it could get better, now that I can remember most of what happened.” She removed an envelope from her purse. “But I need a job. I got my rejection letter today.”

“What?” Tom lunged for it.

“Just kidding.” She unfolded the document, allowing him to see the return address: Middleton Medical Center. “It’s a confirmation of their offer.”

“What does it say?”

“Oh, just the typical stuff. But I have a question about the salary.”

“What! It’s almost twice what you’d make at…” Then he looked at her mouth and saw it twitch as she tried to repress a smile. “Oh, yeah. That’s just to entice you to accept the job. I’m sure the letter fails to mention the salary goes down each year after that. That’s just an insider tip. Don’t tell anyone I told you.”

“Why you!” Pam held up a lemon from her water glass and threatened to squirt him.

His responding grin warmed her all over and washed away the years of their separation. At moments like this, she found herself easily admitting that she never stopped loving this man. Before, with no hope of reconciliation, she'd buried the pain of that realization. Now, she reveled in it. Thank you, God, she prayed silently. Thank you for bringing us back together. And please, help us not to lose each other ever again.

"So what do you think the solution should be?" he asked, intently.

"Your life is there." And your children, she added silently. "And I've got a great job there."

"And this nut case? What about him? If he took the trouble to get inside your hotel room, and now called your home telephone number, I don't think we should underestimate him. I want to expose this guy before he can do anything else. And I don't want you in danger in the meantime."

Pam agreed. "Thank you, but I think that's the point. If he found my number, which I thought was unlisted, then he can easily find out where I live." She shrugged. "So you see? I don't think it matters where I live. If he wants to cause trouble, he can."

Tom peered into her eyes. "You'd really move down there?"

Pam held her breath. She heard her aunt's voice. "In life there are no coincidences. God will show us His way. We just need to be smart enough to see it."

"I really will."

Tom looked ready to fall off his chair. "Even though you'd be giving up the city life? All your friends?"

She shrugged. "I'd be in the same position if I go to Chicago. Besides," she grinned. "Middleton's cost of living is much lower. I'll get more bang out of the big bucks you'll be paying me."

"And you'd be dating me? We'd be together? And it wouldn't bother you if people talked, saying you took the job so you could be with me? Or that you got the job because of me?"

"Well..." She flashed him a coy smile. Everything felt so much less complicated or threatening now, even with that weirdo out there.

"Well what? I'm dying from the suspense."

"To tell you the truth..."

"I find truth to always be the best policy," Tom agreed heartily, making her laugh.

She scratched her nose. “Do you think people will talk? About us, I mean. I already know they’ll talk about the accident, but I think I can handle that now.”

“People in Middleton talk? About us? Romance?” He gave her an astonished glance, making her laugh even more. “What makes you even think to ask a question like that? Heck, we’ll make the headlines before we reach the city limits.”

“Oh, dear.”

A shadow of alarm washed over him. “Will you be okay with that?”

Smiling, Pam rolled her eyes. “I’ll get over it...or at least accustomed to it.”

“Good.” Jumping to his feet, he reached inside his jacket pocket and retrieved a black velvet box. On one knee now, he took her left hand. “Pamela Harrington, will you marry me?”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Completely shocked, Pam felt her eyes mist. Without waiting for a reply, Tom opened the box and slipped a diamond and ruby band onto her left ring finger. It fit perfectly.

“The offer’s still good,” he assured her, clasping her hand in both of his. “Even if we live here in Boston or Chicago. I’d planned on proposing tonight anyway. When you left me in the dirt last week, I realized how much I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. And I don’t want to wait a second longer to get started.”

Still tongue-tied, Pam stared at the beautiful sparkling jewels. Then at Tom. She couldn’t believe he’d proposed.

“We can exchange it,” he told her. “I bought it because I liked it right away. I thought it would look beautiful on you.”

Emphatically, Pam shook her head. “No. I love it. I was just thinking it’s exactly what I would have chosen.” And it was. Not that she’d ever gone looking for engagement rings before. A row of six half-carat stones lay in a band of gold. Touching his hands, she smiled out of sheer elation. Yes, they had some unresolved issues, her brain warned. But they could handle them, her heart replied. They were not alone. God wouldn’t have thrown them together like this just to let them languish. “Thank you,” she whispered, gazing into his eyes. “And I love you.”

“So you accept?”

“Yes,” she giggled. “I accept.”

****

Pam checked the time. Deciding to drive, they’d returned Tom’s Taurus to the rental company and took Pam’s Volvo. Tom drove most of the way. Somewhere along the New Jersey turnpike, she finally convinced him to let her to take a turn. Now, calculating the distance left, she figured they’d approach the city’s limits a little after two a.m.

Sighing with more contentment than she could ever recall, Pam listened to Tom’s steady breathing as he slept next to her in the passenger seat. I can’t believe I’m getting married, her thoughts repeated for the millionth time. To Thomas Jarrod! Then a warning voice whispered, And live in Middleton. But Pam ignored it. The medical center was a good career

move. The salary was higher than she'd expected and working with Dr. Everett made her incredibly portable, if she ever decided to leave the area.

Immediately, Pam wiped away that thought. Tom's life was there and she would make her life there, too. In fact, she found it incredible to even consider having any life outside her medical career.

"I bet I can guess what you're thinking."

Pam jumped, then let out a laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

Gently, he traced random designs on her forearm with his finger. "Scared?"

"A bit," she answered, matter-of-factly.

"Happy?"

"Oh, definitely! How about you?"

"Amazingly. But I want you to know that if you begin to feel awkward, or troubled about anything, please let me know. This is a big step."

Pam's stomach tightened. Oh, no. Did that mean he was having second thoughts already?

"You mean about getting married?"

He shook her shoulder. "No way, Woman. I mean about living in Middleton. I've got to tell you, it's going to be a big change of lifestyle for you. Our idea of a good time means going to the annual county fair. And then there's the bowling league we'll join. The nearest kind of mall, like you're used to, is over an hour away, and we only have one cinema. It shows two movies. Max. And sometimes, it's the same movie. Not like that palace place with twenty-five screens I found yesterday when I went out exploring. Man. That was amazing!"

"Oh, how I remember," Pam laughed. "I went through the culture shock years ago when we first moved there. And when you rejected my application for the rescue squad." She shook her head. "I didn't know what I was going to do with myself."

Tom leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. "Got a secret to tell you."

"Okay."

"My refusing to hire you was probably illegal. At that time, sixteen was the legal age. With your experience, you could have sued me and won."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm serious," Tom said. "I think they call it gender discrimination. You were so cute. I knew I'd be in trouble if I hired you."

“Thanks for the compliment,” she teased, amazed that two people could be so in sync. Are we really meant for each other? she asked God. Is that why You had Dad transferred there? So we would meet?

Tom ran his hand through her hair. “The deputy police chief and I are meeting tomorrow morning about that other thing.”

Pam felt the knot tighten in her stomach, but she refused to focus on it. “Thank you.”

“As a precaution, we agreed that you’ll sleep at my parents’ house this weekend. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“And when I can’t be around, you won’t go wandering any place alone. Unless, of course, we decide to set a trap. But then we’d plan it all out in advance.”

Pam wrinkled her forehead. “A trap?”

“If not now, then later. When we move you down permanently. I’d like to nail this guy quick so we can put it behind us.”

In her mind, Pam pictured all the people she loved and surrounded them with pink and white light. “Thank you,” she whispered. “And I believe God will protect us. But it’s funny.”

“What’s funny?”

“Now that I have a fairly clear picture of how the accident occurred, I’m curious about who’s behind trying to dredge it up. Do they consider it a joke? Or does someone still grieve over what happened? That would be horrible.”

“Like it’s horrible for you?”

Driving, Pam stared out into the velvet night. They’d turned off the highway ten miles ago, onto the unlit, two-lane road leading into Middleton. “I still feel responsible. Maybe it’s out of habit. Survivor’s guilt and all. But since the hypnosis, I don’t feel so paralyzed by it. If someone is still tormented like that, I hope we can help them resolve it. Even if it means that they need to confront me.”

“So long as I’m around when they do it,” Tom insisted.

Pam relished his hand kneading the tight muscles in the back of her neck. My entire professional life involves human touch, she realized. But it is my touch. My hands on my patients, fighting to save their lives. How have I managed, she wondered, for so long without someone touching me like this?

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty-Six

Deputy police chief, Bill Houser, held up a police file in the air. “Here it is.”

Determined to clear up the accident matter, Tom had spent three hours with him in the basement of the police department, plowing through box after box of old cases.

“Looks a little thin to be a double death. Doesn’t it?” Tom asked.

Nodding, Bill carried the aged, manila folder over to a dusty card table. “Let’s take a look.”

Ten minutes later, Tom leaned back in the rickety chair and chewed on the end of a pen cap. “All it says is that Ryan Collins was dangerously intoxicated and probably passed out at the wheel. The heavy rains that night washed away most of the evidence. Only skid marks, leading into the woods, remained.”

“What’s on your mind?” Houser asked.

“I can’t believe there are only three photographs. One of the crashed vehicles and one each of the deceased victims. Shouldn’t there be more?” He studied the pictures again, hoping something would catch his eye. It didn’t.

“I was out of town that entire weekend,” Houser told him. “My family put on some kind of reunion. I didn’t know about the accident until we got back home.”

“And ole Murphy, the chief back then, responded to the scene. But he’s dead now.”

Houser nodded. “Coronary. A bunch of years back.”

Baffled, Tom stood and stretched his stiff muscles. “We’ve got to be missing something. And someone seems awfully worried that we’re going to find out what it is.”

“You’re sure no one tried to contact Pam immediately after the accident?”

“So she says,” Tom answered. “And she had no reason to lie.”

“And last week is the first time since the accident that she’s come back here?”

“Yes. Whoever’s bothering her knew she was here. They knew where she was staying and how to get into her room. They also knew what to do to

spook her.”

Releasing a loud breath, Tom watched the deputy earnestly scribble some notes.

Bill Houser always looked so serious. A few years older than Tom, and much more straight-laced, they didn’t travel in the same circles. Instead, Tom knew the man only through hanging around his younger brothers. Even back then, the eldest Houser in a family of eight kids talked about growing up to be a cop. After graduating high school with honors, he attended the local community college and worked part-time at the police department.

As a rookie, Bill Houser quickly earned a solid reputation as a fair, thorough and no-nonsense cop. Just what a small town needed. Last year, the town council, Tom included, unanimously appointed him the department’s number two man.

Recently, Tom had started working with Houser to develop emergency routes and procedures for rescue vehicles. Next month, Bill intended to testify before the zoning board about potential traffic flow problems if it approved Susan’s petition to build more housing developments and a mall.

“When did you say the perpetrator last contacted Pam?” Houser asked.

“Last Tuesday. At her condo in Boston.”

“Has Pam spoken to any members of Collins’ family or Megan’s family since the crash?”

Tom shook his head. “Not Collins. He’s from a few towns over. They didn’t know each other.”

“And his parents probably have their own guilt to deal with, what with Ryan being drunk and all,” Houser added. “I’ll go talk to them, but I really don’t see them holding a grudge against Pam. What about Megan’s folks?”

“Pam checked. They’re living in Florida. Her mom and Pam exchange Christmas cards. That’s about it. I think Megan’s brother may still be around somewhere. He was five years older and away at college back then. Pam didn’t really know him.”

The deputy wrote something else, then tossed down his pen. “That probably eliminates them also. Unless they were having Pam watched they wouldn’t even know she was here.” He fiddled with the end of his mustache. “The only theory I can come up with at this point is that someone feels threatened by Pam returning to Middleton.”

“And they’re using the accident to try to keep her away,” Tom finished.

His face pinched in thought, Houser nodded.

“But it’s so ridiculous! Pam’s never done anything to give anyone a reason to dislike her.” A few seconds later, he noticed the silence. He glanced in the deputy’s direction. The man stared at him intently. He looked like he wanted to say something. Then his expression changed.

“What about the other candidate for the job at the medical center?” Houser suggested. “Maybe he really wanted the position.”

Tom considered it. “It’s a possibility. Remote, but maybe? I’ll get you his name and address.”

“The only other option I can come up with is...”

Tom felt his stomach and mouth clench. It wasn’t necessary for Bill to finish the sentence.

“You know her better than any of us,” Houser reminded him. “I think you’ll agree she can be one formidable lady at times.”

“He’s got a point, Tom.”

Both men jerked around to stare at the doorway. Eddie Cartwright grinned, tipping his baseball cap. “Didn’t mean to eavesdrop. Just stopping by to see if I could give you a hand. It doesn’t take a brain surgeon to figure out who you’re referring to.”

Houser nodded. “Susan’s making no secret of the fact that she’s furious at you, Tom, for planning to lease that back parcel of land to the proposed rehab center. The last I heard, she’s filed an objection to your zoning application for the site. She plans to challenge you publicly at the next meeting.”

Tom clenched his fists to stop from smashing them on the table. Will this woman ever stop, Lord?

His sons’ faces flashed in his memory. She’s taken nearly everything from me and now this? The town needs that rehab center. And the back parcel of my farm will make a perfect location.

“It’s her revenge for your objection to the housing development she wants to build,” Eddie said.

“Add that,” Houser suggested, “to the thought of you getting cozy with Pamela Harrington, her imagined old rival. That could be enough to send her over the edge.” He paused. “I think I’ll be stopping by her house later today to ask a few questions.”

They were right, Tom confirmed. Right before Pam arrived in town last week, he and Eddie had discussed Susan’s possible reactions.

And then, she’d showed up at the restaurant.

Recalling the scene, he accidentally snapped the pencil in his hand. Frowning, he shook his head. No matter which way he looked at it, the lady was just bad news. She needed to be stopped. Now.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Do you know what kind of wedding you want?” Rebecca Cartwright asked, driving them to the closest full-sized mall.

The whole idea sounded so new, Pam could only grin and shake her head. When Rebecca had called her cell phone that Saturday morning, offering to spend the afternoon showing her around the area, Pam eagerly accepted. Tom, who needed to get back to work, was pleased when she told him.

“Big? Or small? Date? Location?”

“I guess I need to decide all that. Don’t I?”

Rebecca chuckled. “Yes. And I’ll be happy to help. Whether it’s here or in Boston. I love weddings.”

“I’d like that,” Pam assured her. And she meant it. From their first meeting over at Tom’s house, Pam had felt thrilled to find a new friend. Since Megan’s death, Pam hadn’t had a chance to make many real women friends. She knew plenty of acquaintances, but close friendships were tough. Mary Ann, a fellow intern while in med school, moved to D.C. last year when her husband transferred there. And Diane, an ED nurse, had her hands full with four kids.

“There’s a Liz Claiborne outlet here?” Pam asked, seeing a billboard. It also listed the names of other outlet stores she recognized.

“Yes,” Rebecca laughed, taking an exit. “That’s where we’re headed. It’s just about a mile away.”

“How far have we gone?”

Rebecca checked the odometer. “I’d say we’re about seventy-two miles away from home, but it’s definitely worth the ride.”

“And most of it’s highway driving,” Pam said optimistically. “The traffic in the Boston area can be brutal.” She looked out at the vast fields to her left and right. Every once in a while, they’d pass an industrial area. She could see a small housing development nearby. Otherwise, the road and the adjacent landscape looked barren.

“Well, I figured you might be a bit curious about where to do your shopping around here. I know there’s always the Internet, and the small mall outside of town isn’t bad, but lots of times I’m in the mood to hunt for bargains or just window shop.”

Delighted, Pam agreed. “I know just what you mean. I don’t usually buy a lot. I think it just helps me wind down after a long shift at the hospital.”

They arrived at the mall a few minutes after one. Pam was anxious to get to the bed and bath shop. That morning Marlene Everett had called to say she reserved one of the medical center’s apartments for her. Several units had been built nearby to accommodate visiting physicians and families of patients who lived far away. She thought it might suit Pam’s needs until the wedding.

When Pam and Rebecca stopped by the apartment on their way out of town, she found it much larger than she expected. And well furnished. She’d decided to buy new sheets and towels.

Peering into store windows, Pam said, “That was nice of Eddie’s mom to take your kids.”

Rebecca agreed, cutting the engine. “Ma’s great. Since I’ve started back at school to get my Master’s degree, she and my mom take turns helping out. Though the kids go to preschool and kindergarten, it’s only half day. I tried to schedule my classes when they’re in school and get my studying done, too, but I got stuck with one night class this term. It’s a required prerequisite, so I couldn’t put it off.” She sighed. “This fall’s been a bit of an adjustment. But then that’s what parenthood is. One wonderful and continual adjustment.”

Rebecca’s words reminded Pam of Tom’s sons. As they walked to the stores, she asked, “Is there a bookstore nearby?” Maybe she could find something about divorced families and being a stepmother.

“Sure. It’s a huge one, over on the right,” Rebecca replied. “It’s next door to a great restaurant. We can eat lunch there.”

Pam grinned. “A woman after my own heart.”

And while they ate, she could bring up the subject of Tom’s boys.

A bit later, she and Rebecca left the bath shop, where Pam had purchased two sets of thick, soft, oversized towels. One was lemon yellow. The other pale lavender. Eventually, they’d go beautifully with the grass green and white accessories she envisioned in one of the bathrooms at Tom’s house. She sighed. A new color scheme for a new bathroom in her new life.

Thank you, God, she prayed. Now, I know nothing is perfect. So I’m not even going to ask why you’ve blessed me with an ex-wife, two

estranged kids and a questionable person hounding me. Instead, I want you to know I’m counting on you to help.

Without warning, Rebecca gripped her arm. “Hold on to your hat!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure if we should pretend we don’t see her, or face her head on.”

By the time Pam caught on, the decision was already made for them.

“Well, hello ladies. I hear congratulations are in order for you, Pam. Or maybe, my condolences.”

Rebecca’s grip tightened. “Hello, Susan.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ignoring Rebecca, Susan sneered at Pam. “So you decided to marry him. Maybe, before you set a date, you and I should have lunch one afternoon. I’d be more than happy to fill you in on what he’s really like.”

The ice in the woman’s tone matched the daggers in her eyes. If they were back in high school, maybe Pam would have felt intimidated. But here? Now? No way! This wasn’t high school, and she hadn’t spent her entire life in Middleton.

Unable to take Susan seriously, Pam smiled at the two, handsome boys. As if on cue, Rebecca introduced them.

“A.J. and Mark, please say hi to Dr. Harrington. She’s a friend of mine.”

Before either child could respond, their mother pushed them past Pam and Rebecca. “Mind your own business, Rebecca. And don’t either of you dare speak to my kids.”

After a moment, Pam and Rebecca looked at each other and burst out laughing. Walking to the next store, Rebecca apologized. “I am so sorry. This is the only decent place around to shop. Rumor has it Susie’s a shopaholic, but it never occurred to me we’d run into her here. Today.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s not your fault. Just tell me something.”

“Sure.”

“Tom proposed to me a little over forty-eight hours ago. How did Susan find out so quickly? Who could have known to be able to tell her?”

Rebecca’s eyes widened. “Oh, dear.”

“Yes?” Pam asked dryly.

She quickly shook her head. “Nothing. Let’s go in here.” She pointed to a women’s specialty store. “I need a couple of outfits. And you deserve some new things, too.”

“Me? Why me?”

Rebecca gave her a conspirator’s wink. “Think about it. You’re a newly engaged woman, the holidays are coming, and you’ve taken a prestigious job at a prominent medical center. The social possibilities are endless.”

Puzzled, Pam tried to understand what she meant. “You mean like showers, parties, that kind of thing?”

As Rebecca nodded, Pam considered her current wardrobe and almost shrieked. Not that she wanted to try to compete, but next to Susan, she felt

like an old rag doll. “Now it’s my turn to say, ‘Oh, dear.’”

“Let’s get manicures,” Rebecca suggested.

Pam studied her bare nails. That wasn’t a bad idea. “Is there a place nearby?”

“Sure is. Not far from the bookstore. And they’re very fast. We don’t even need an appointment.”

“How convenient.”

“Sure is,” Rebecca assured her.

Pam detected a giggle in Rebecca’s voice. She faced the woman and noted a gleam in her dark brown eyes. “You know something.”

Her new friend gave her a hug. “Trust me on this. It’s a good thing.”

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“What else do we need?” Tom asked his mom.

Katie Jarrod concentrated on putting the final touches on a three-tiered chocolate mousse cake. “Read me the list.”

Tom cleared his throat. “From the top, we’ve got steaks, chicken, swordfish, hamburgers and hot dogs for the kids, jumbo shrimp cocktail, corn on the cob, scalloped potatoes, sweet potatoes, green bean salad and tossed salad. What’s left?”

“An army to feed it all to,” Tom Sr. chimed in. “When are the troops due?”

“Seven o’clock,” Katie answered.

“Is it still a surprise?”

Tom dunked a freshly washed shrimp in cocktail sauce and stuffed it into his mouth. “Uh-huh. Unless Rebecca blew it.”

“Consider it blown,” his dad laughed. “It’s a known fact, son. One you’ve got to keep in mind for the future. Women can’t keep their traps shut about anything having to do with men, weddings or babies. It’s like some kind of secret honor code they have. Indoctrinated at birth. Gab, gab, gab.”

“Hm.” Katie snorted. “Add some of that really strong horseradish to the list. I think I’ll slip some of it into your father’s coffee when he’s not suspecting it.”

“On a more serious note,” Tom interjected, changing the subject, “I want to thank you both for this party. I know this seems sort of sudden, my popping the question to Pam, but it feels right. You two have been great about it, and about everything that’s happened in the past.”

“We love you, Tommy,” his mother said, with tears in her voice. “And we’ve liked that girl from the first time you brought her home.” She looked at her husband, then back to Tom. “We’re so pleased it’s working out for you.”

Tom’s dad patted him on the back. “We just want you to be happy, son.”

Tom gave his parents each a hug, then handed Katie an envelope.

“What’s this?”

He grinned. “Open it.”

“Oh, my stars!” she gasped. With trembling fingers, she removed two tickets and a travel brochure.

“What you got there?” Tom Sr. asked, prying them from her fingers. “A two-week tour of Europe. Well, ain’t that gonna be something?”

“This must have cost you a fortune!” Katie challenged, skimming the brochure.

“And you’re worth every penny. Happy fortieth wedding anniversary.”

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“How bad is it?”

Rebecca peeked at Pam over the menu. “How bad is what?”

Pam arched her a knowing eyebrow. “Don’t give me that. You know exactly what I’m talking about.” While at the bookstore, Rebecca had watched Pam buy two books on step-parenting.

“That’s a good idea,” she’d commented. At the time, Pam didn’t get a chance to ask her to elaborate. She broached the subject again as they walked the short distance to the restaurant. Lucky for Rebecca, they were interrupted by the hostess, who was ready to seat them immediately.

Rebecca closed her menu and took a sip of iced tea. Replacing the glass on a coaster, she asked, “Do you pray?”

Pam rolled her eyes. “All the time. I feel like I have God on speed dial. Why? Am I going to need to start focusing on something specific?”

Rebecca gave her an apologetic grimace. “How much has Tom told you?”

“Clearly, not enough. The general gist was that he hasn’t seen his kids in quite a while. I can tell it bothers him. He closes down every time I mention them.”

Saying the words, she recalled a depressing statistic. Something having to do with children from prior marriages being the main reasons why new marriages fail. Dear God. What am I getting into? Is this some kind of

warning that Tom and I should cool it? I got so caught up in the excitement of everything that's been happening...the job...seeing Tom again, the nut case bothering me about the accident. I really haven't taken the time to get the whole picture.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to Tom," Pam heard Rebecca say. "Eddie and I pray so hard for him, asking God to help him and Susan cut the crap. For the boys' sakes, if not for themselves. You could be the answer." She took a deep breath.

"But?"

Rebecca crinkled her nose, looking at Pam sympathetically. "I don't want to sound like I'm bad-mouthing Susan. And I don't want to scare you away."

"Go on. I can take it." I hope.

"It's just that there's such a history. Tom and Susan are like oil and water. No matter what you do to try to mix the two, it just doesn't happen."

"Interesting analogy," Pam commented. The waitress arrived before she could say anything else. While they ordered their lunches, she could tell Rebecca was bracing herself to continue their conversation. Patiently, she sat back and waited.

"The marriage was never exactly made in heaven," Rebecca began, busying her hands by buttering a roll. "A few months after A.J. arrived, Tom's dad came down with pneumonia. Understandably, Tom helped out even more than usual with the farm. It was also a bad season, weather wise. They risked losing a large portion of the crops, and Tom knew that meant a lean year. But it infuriated Susan. I guess the baby was really colicky and, well, there was a lot of stress." Rebecca paused to take another drink.

"Eventually, word got around that Susan met up with another man. He came from out of town. We found out later that he owned one of the construction companies that invested in rehabbing the town."

"So that's how Susan got into real estate."

"Exactly." Rebecca waited until the waiter finished delivering their French onion soup. "I guess he was married, too. When the project ended a year later, so did they. From an outsider's view, it appeared that Tom and Susan continued on, acting as if nothing happened."

Pam went to reach for her spoon, then stopped. She looked at her new friend.

"Grace?" Rebecca suggested.

Without warning, Pam felt her throat tighten and her eyes fill. Not only was she getting a good girlfriend, but one she could pray with. That was something she had wondered about when the Cartwrights came to Tom's house the other night for dinner. But the atmosphere felt so charged at the time that everyone started munching on Tom's fabulous appetizers the second they came out of the oven. With all the activity and chatter, they skipped grace. Sorry, Lord, she prayed silently. And thank you. Now she needed to find the courage to go inside a church again. For the longest time, she just hadn't felt worthy enough to do so. Now she felt an urge to try.

Though Pam's faith had always been strong, it had also been very private. And living in such a secular, rushed world all these years didn't often lend itself to a lot of fellowship. She realized now that things in that area of her life might change for the better there, too. She took a deep breath, then released it, feeling a lot of stored up tension leave her body.

She nodded. "Grace."

Afterward, while they ate, Pam picked up the conversation where they left off. "And Tom didn't file for divorce then? He'd certainly had good reason."

Sadly, Rebecca shrugged. "I don't know. Not that I believe in divorce, mind you. I don't. But if two people cannot reach a meeting of the minds and all they're doing is hurting each other and their kids...well, it would have been understandable. But Tom said no. He took a lot of the blame for what happened. He admitted he hadn't exactly been the best husband. His heart was never really in the marriage."

She paused to finish her soup. "And Susan knew it. When she tried to patch things up, he agreed to give it another shot. They went to counseling and tried spending more time together. They even started going to church. We'd see them and they actually seemed happy. Mark arrived soon after."

"And then?"

Rebecca rolled her eyes. "Susan's father died. Suddenly. He suffered a heart attack and could not be revived. In his will, he left everything to Susan and Jennifer, her younger sister."

"Everything? The farm? The land?" It had to be worth over a million, Pam calculated.

"Everything," Rebecca confirmed. "Her mom had already passed on, years earlier. He wasn't much of a farmer. Instead he hired people. But it made money. And you may not know this, but he was also the town's chief

of police. On top of the property, there was life insurance and a pension from the department."

Pam digested this as their sandwiches arrived.

"A month later, Susan bought out her sister's share of the real estate. Now, mind you, this was before the real estate boom. After a year, the property tripled in value. Susan put a bunch of acres on the market and made a bundle. When Tom refused to do the same with his share of his dad's farm, Mr. Construction Company suddenly re-appeared in the picture. Susan divorced Tom, and then married the guy who was suddenly single. The marriage lasted a little more than two years."

"Just long enough to build that new development you and I drove past this morning when you picked me up."

Rebecca smiled. "You catch on quick. They both did quite well financially. Then, he took off again. Ever since, World Wars Three through Twelve have broken out between Susan and Tom."

Pam digested the information while she and Rebecca ate. But Pam didn't actually eat. Instead, she found herself picking at her hamburger, wondering about Tom and the boys and how she could fit into this colorful mosaic.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I hope I’m not scaring you away,” Rebecca said to Pam.

Pam shook her head. “No.” Providing Tom kept his head together about all this. How embarrassing it must have been for him. Just down right humiliating. She mentioned his willingness to relocate to Boston or Chicago.

“Maybe you two should really consider it,” Rebecca suggested, sounding truly sincere. “A change of scenery might do Tom some good. We’d miss you terribly, but at least it would keep both of you out of the line of fire.”

Again, Pam shook her head. “No. His family and career is here. All that’s he’s worked for. And his kids are here. By the way, what’s up with them?”

Rebecca’s expression turned perplexed. “Depends on who you ask. According to Susan, Tom abandoned them. Everyone who knows the whole story disagrees.”

“So what happened?”

“I’m no shrink, but from what I’ve been reading in one of my advanced psychology courses, it sounds like a classic case of alienation on Susan’s part. Though she seems tough on the outside, inside she’s desperately insecure and paranoid that everyone is out to get her.”

“So she gets them first?” Pam asked, familiar with a personality type she’d met occasionally through her medical practice.

“That seems to be the bottom line,” Rebecca nodded. “If she can’t pin you down under her thumb and make you do everything she says, she panics and does really bizzare things. Which she did...at least where Tom and the boys are concerned. He tried to work with her, and spent thousands of dollars going to court, but eventually he just gave up.”

“Can you give me details? I mean, I don’t want you to betray any confidences, but…”

Rebecca sighed. “There are no secrets. Susan made certain of that. It’s just sad. The boys are really good kids. And with Susan, I’m sure they’re perfect.”

“To avoid any repercussions?”

“Most likely. She sees everything as a reflection on her. So when they stayed with Tom, they’d sort of go wild to counter that military-type behavior she expected of them. But Tom handled it pretty well. He knew how Susan was. Eddie and I hung around a lot of the time helping him out. So did his parents. Tom thought it was very important for the boys to know their family. Susan doesn’t have much, and what’s left she doesn’t bother with. To this day, Jennifer swears Susan swindled her when buying her out of her portion of their father’s estate.”

Rebecca paused to take a last bite of her tuna melt sandwich. “It’s funny. That’s one of the things Susan both liked and resented about Tom. That he came from a close-knit family and she didn’t. She liked the closeness. The ability to have someone to rely upon. To share everyday experiences, along with the big holiday celebrations. But at the same time, she resented that she didn’t have that herself. Like it made her look bad. So she rebelled against it. I’ve actually heard her taunt Tom. Calling him a mama’s boy, that kind of thing. Then she’d have no qualms about asking his mom to watch the boys so she could go out with her lovers.”

“While they were still married?”

“Yes. But that would never have occurred to Katie. She’s just a really nice woman who enjoys helping other people out. So nice that if Satan knocked on the door, I bet she’d invite him in for tea and ask about his day.”

Pam rolled her eyes. “Wonderful.”

“Getting back to the boys, we know Susan drilled them after every visitation with Tom. I’m sure it slipped out how much they liked being with him and the family. I suspect they were getting old enough to express their feelings. They could also question their mother’s opinions and versions of the stories they’d heard. It probably scared the daylights out of her. She was petrified the boys would somehow favor Tom over her. To prevent that, she started playing mind games.”

“By doing what?” Pam asked.

“Everyone around started noticing the kids having a real hard time adjusting each time they visited Tom. I’d see how hostile they’d act for the first few hours. Bad-mouthing him and his parents. That sort of thing. The younger one would start to cry, saying that Mommy was really mad at Daddy. He was going to jail and Grandma was going to hell for some reason. It really got awful. But Tom would talk to the boys and let them get

it out of their systems, and then they'd be fine. Until it was time to get packed up and wait for Susan to pick them up. Then they'd start acting uneasy. Even uptight. I'm convinced they were afraid their mom would find out that they'd had a good time."

"So what did Tom do?"

"He told the boys they were welcome any time they wanted. He didn't want to force them to see him. He didn't want them to feel uncomfortable, like they had to see him, and then be preoccupied with wondering about what their mom might think. He told Susan the same thing, but added that he was sick and tired of her making them feel bad about seeing him. He didn't want to put them through it any more."

"Oh, my," Pam groaned. "How did she react?"

"Not well. And it's been like a train wreck ever since. Every time Tom's tried to see them, like being a chaperone on a school trip, or going to a soccer game, she'd either keep the kids at home or make a scene in public saying that he planned to kidnap them. Recently, he's just thrown in the towel."

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Tom debated what he should do about Susan's latest demand. She'd made it earlier that morning via a telephone call, and then hung up in her typical take-no-prisoners way. Walking the length of his property with the two dogs in tow, it occurred to him that maybe it could be made to work in his favor. Uncharacteristically, she had been avoiding him for the past several months. No nasty messages left at his office or on his answering machine at home. No new accusations about him whispered via the town grapevine. Nothing.

He threw a stick for the dogs to fetch. Maybe Susan had realized that if she kept making demands on him, she was opening the door for him to take court action to see their sons. But she could have just been distracted, setting her sights on making someone else miserable. Whether the victim was a new man in her life or someone she viewed as an enemy, either way it directed her focus away from him. Which was good. He didn't want any contact with her. If it weren't for the boys, he'd block all the memories, including the pain and mistakes, from his mind entirely. He bent to remove the stick from Rusty's mouth and threw it again.

Yet, what if Susan was up to something? Knowing her like he did, Tom suspected the latter. And it wasn't more child support. The zoning board

meeting was scheduled for two weeks from now. She had a lot riding on getting approval for her project. Was this recent demand used to induce him to withdraw his objection and his project? Well, she was definitely barking up the wrong tree there, but at least the lines of communication were open now. Fuzzy static, but open. Maybe he should take the opportunity to make some demands of his own?

Then again, could Susan's sudden attention have something to do with Pam's return? Did it really bother her that he and Pam were resuming their relationship? Her sudden appearance at the restaurant Thursday night was out of character. Could she have broken into Pam's hotel room and left that message to try to scare here away? And then followed it up with that call to her in Boston? Would Susan really go that far? And if so, why? And if it wasn't her, then who was it?

Tom's cell phone rang, interrupting his train of thought. He looked at the number glowing on the caller ID and smiled.

"Hey gorgeous. What's up?"

"Just wanted to let you know we're on our way home."

Hearing her voice, a warm, comforting feeling washed over him. Pam was coming home. In a few weeks, it would be their home. Did he pop the question too soon? The answer depends on who you ask. But to him, it was a long time overdue.

"Stay safe. I'll be here waiting."

Ending the call, he heard the words, "God has a timetable for everything."

Tom blinked. Hey. Where did that come from? It just popped into his head! Never mind. He already knew the answer. How many times, growing up, did he hear his mom say that? He remembered begging her to count the days left before Christmas. Or until school was out for the year. Be patient, she'd say.

Tom felt Delilah trying to get his attention again by hitting his leg with the stick. Bending down, he gave both dogs a good scratching behind their ears. "It's real easy to be patient when everything is going your way," he told them, tossing the stick into the air. "And right now, even with all the crap going on with A.J. and Mark, I'm feeling on top of the world!"

Dear God, he prayed silently while watching his dogs stretch their long legs. Thanks so much for bringing Pam back to me. I promise I'll do everything in my power not to mess this up. And it would be greatly

appreciated if you'd help out in that area. I can be dense sometimes, as you know. And please, we could use your help with whoever is trying to bother her about the accident. I'd like to get that squared away before the wedding so we don't have it looming over us like a dark cloud. Thanks.

"Come on, guys!" he called to his dogs and then turned his head back toward the house. He needed to shower and change for the evening. Pam thought they were going out for dinner. Boy, was she in for a surprise. He couldn't wait to see her expression when she walked in on the engagement party his parents were throwing for them.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty

“A surprise engagement party?” Pam repeated. They were entering the salon to get their nails done when Rebecca sprung the news. Swallowing hard, she checked her reflection in the large mirrored wall.

“Afraid so,” Rebecca teased. “Tom’s folks wanted to throw you a party to introduce you to the family. Once you move down here, your schedule’s going to be tight, and the holidays are coming, so they figured now would be the best time.”

Though dismayed, Pam was touched. “That’s so nice. And on such short notice. His mom must be spending the entire day working on it.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not a problem for Katie. She loves throwing parties. She’s an expert. I’m just telling you because I think, if I were in your position, I’d want to know.”

“Absolutely. Thank you.” Imagining all the preparation, Pam reached for a large hair styling book lying on the counter. Twenty minutes later, she sat back in the leather chair and closed her eyes. The warm water combined with the stylist’s able fingers expertly massaging her scalp, helped to clear her mind and slow down her spinning thoughts.

“Do you have any particular style in mind?” the stylist asked.

Pam blinked up at the attractive woman. “I, uh.” Then she saw her new friend picking out a nail polish. “Rebecca?” she called out. “What style did we have in mind?”

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“She slipped and told you,” Tom teased, greeting Pam at the back door. Following his instructions, Rebecca had brought her back to the Jarrod farm at six o’clock sharp.

Pam felt her cheeks flush. “Can’t a girl get her hair done now and then?”

Laughing, Tom pulled her to him while her arms were still filled with shopping bags. “Definitely. And believe me, you look fantastic. I love the shorter look.”

Self-conscious, Pam managed to release the bags and lift her hand to the back of her head. Throwing caution to the wind, she’d agreed to follow the stylist’s suggestion to give her a chin-length bob. That meant cutting off at least three inches! Fortunately, the stylist had been right. Her natural wave

added just the right amount of bounce to the style. Still, it would take a little getting used to.

“And you smell good, too,” Tom told her, nuzzling her neck. “I can’t wait to show you off. Everyone is looking forward to meeting you.”

Pam looked over his shoulder for his parents, but no one else seemed to be there. “Speaking of everyone, where are they all?”

“Ah, so at least Rebecca kept that part a secret. You’ll have to wait and see.”

Nodding, she started to mention arranging a time for him to meet her family when the telephone rang.

“I left specific orders not to be disturbed tonight,” he told her, releasing his hold.

“While you answer that, I’ll start getting ready.” After blowing him a kiss, Pam gathered her new purchases and made her way upstairs to Tom’s old room. She knew exactly what to wear thanks to Rebecca’s help. She laid the bags on his bed and pulled out a pair of deep purple silk pants and a beautifully tailored matching jacket. It had a V-neck collar and fell to her waist. She’d started to undress when suddenly she heard Tom’s raised voice.

“If I’d asked, you would have said no. But since I didn’t ask, you’ve decided to make the offer. Well, you can pound sand, Susan. I am sick and tired of playing your games!”

Startled, Pam went down the stairs as quickly as she could.

“You can threaten all you want,” Tom warned. “Tonight is still out of the question.”

He stood with his back to Pam, pacing the length of the kitchen. One hand held the phone away from his ear while the other clenched tight in a fist.

Pam could overhear a female voice on the other end of the line. “This is just one more example of how little you care about our children! I should just tell the judge to terminate your rights entirely!”

It had to be Susan. Who else could it be? What did she want? Then a thought occurred to her. If the woman knew about their engagement, she probably also knew about tonight’s party. Could it be that she wanted to somehow intentionally upset Tom to ruin what should be a happy occasion?

“Go right ahead,” Tom answered, lowering his voice. He enunciated each syllable. “But you better be prepared for what I will gladly say about

you.”

Susan said something Pam couldn’t make out.

“I told you. I’ll see them tomorrow or another time. You pick where and when.”

She wants him to see the boys? Quick! Pam’s mind raced. Think of something! She tapped Tom on the shoulder to get his attention and scanned the room for something to write on.

“Wait,” she whispered. “Don’t hang up.”

Finding a pen on the counter, she jotted a note on a scrap of paper. Tom read it and then looked at her under hooded brows.

“Yes!” Pam insisted in a whispered. She followed with a firm nod.

Slowly, Tom twisted his mouth into a small smile. “Okay. You win. I’ll call my cousins and ask them to bring their kids, too.”

Again, Pam could not decipher the response.

“You heard me. I’ll be at my house. Drop them off any time.”

“I’m not going over there!” Susan yelled loud enough for Pam to hear.

Tom inhaled, clearly struggling to maintain his cool. “Fine. We’ll do everything your way, Susan. My father and I will be there in a half hour. Make sure the boys are ready.”

Seconds later, the phone rang again. Tom’s fury filled his face and his stance. “It’s her again.” Clenching his jaw, he lifted the receiver. “Yes?”

Oh, dear, Pam thought to herself.

“Yeah?” he answered, nodding to Pam he was right. “Fine. Bye.” He hung up the phone. “She changed her mind. She’s decided to drop them off.”

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“Funny how she picked tonight of all nights,” Tom Sr. commented.

Tom kicked an ant hill with the toe of his boot. “Isn’t it, though?” He and his father stood outside in the driveway, waiting for Susan and the boys. “It’s even funnier that she’s suddenly willing to disregard that stupid shrink’s advice. Last year, when I was still fighting to see the boys, he told me it would be dangerous for them to see me without counseling because they had been traumatized by my, he used the phrase, ‘voluntary absence.’”

“And you said?”

Tom swallowed. “I’d rather not repeat it. It wasn’t one of my better moments.”

“Are you doing okay now?”

Tom shoved his hands in his pockets of his suit pants. “My stomach’s so tied in knots it hurts to stand up straight.”

Tom, Sr. nodded. “Understandable.”

“The last time I saw them, we were in the shrink’s office. Susan had gotten A.J. all riled up on the drive over. By the time the kid saw me, he was so angry, it was like he hated me.” Tom raked one hand through his hair. For the second time that evening, he found himself pacing. “I just lost it, Dad. And probably confirmed to the guy every accusation Susan ever made against me.”

Ashamed, Tom released a hissing breath. “I wasn’t mad at A.J. Just at the situation. We come from a nice family. We don’t need social workers and psychologists in our lives. Or detailed schedules of when and where we’re allowed to see one another. We don’t tell strangers our family business, and we don’t bad-mouth each other.”

“And, until you, we didn’t get divorced.”

Tom stopped short. He was almost afraid to look at his father.

“So you’re breaking some new ground for us. Being a pioneer is never easy.”

Tom glanced sideways and caught a smile on the older man’s face. “Cute, Dad.” For a moment, some of the tension lessened.

“Take it easy, son. You made a mistake. You’ve admitted it. Unfortunately, we can’t turn back the clock. All you can do is try to handle things the best way you can. Not as you want them to be. And of course try not to make things worse.”

Tom rolled his eyes. He appreciated his father’s advice and even agreed. It was too late and just too much of a waste of time and emotional energy to keep beating himself up over the past. He felt determined to focus on the present. Still, at times, like tonight, he felt a deep humiliation. Not only did he let himself down, he let his family down. “I’m so sorry I got us into this debacle, Dad. I really never imagined it could get this bad. I know it’s been killing you and mom not to see the boys.”

“Well, we’re going to see them tonight. Along with sixty other people,” Tom Sr. reminded him. “But maybe that’s best. This way A.J. and Mark will have other kids to play with. That should help ease the situation a bit.”

Tom’s watch read seven-thirty. His stomach clenched. Susan and the boys should arrive any minute.

“Do you think they hate me, Dad?” It made him ill to ask, but the question overpowered his senses. Recently, whenever he’d tried to see the boys, Susan would yell, “You abandoned them! They’re afraid of you, and they hate you for it!”

“Remember when you planned to go to Florida?” Tom Sr. asked. “It was during your senior year in high school. A bunch of your friends were going.”

“Yeah.” He heard the crunch of gravel. His breath caught in his lungs. A white car appeared at the base of the long driveway. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Mom found the report card you hid from us. The one with the D in English and the F in French.”

“How could I forget? You didn’t let me go on the trip.” The car inched closer. He could feel beads of sweat pouring down the middle of his back.

“That’s right and you sure were angry about it.”

“And your point is?”

“It’s natural for kids to get mad at their parents. Just like parents get mad at their kids. But it passes. Most likely, if A.J. and Mark are mad at all, I’d wager it’s no more than you felt at us at the time. You got over it. So will they.”

Tom saw the outlines of his sons’ heads. Please Lord, he prayed, don’t let me mess this up.

Truths Unveiled

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Chapter Thirty-One

“She did it on purpose,” Rebecca said, refilling her glass with lemonade.

Pam crunched on a carrot stick. They sat on the couch in the sunroom and had a clear view of the driveway. “Any idea why?”

Rebecca shook her head. “It could be a zillion reasons—one being to detract attention from you and paint herself in a good light. Remember, next to you, Susan looks like the wicked witch of the west from The Wizard of Oz. She probably realized she needed to improve her image, especially if she expects to get sympathy from the zoning board.”

Pam tapped her hand in thought. “So if Susan decides to pretend to put their troubles behind them, Tom needs to do the same thing and withdraw his objection to her plan. Otherwise, he will look like the bad guy. Right?”

“Exactly,” Rebecca agreed, reaching for a stuffed mushroom. “Like tonight, for instance, she won either way. If Tom refused to see the kids, especially after all this time, he’d be portrayed as a rotten father. It doesn’t matter that he’d made other plans. If he really cared, he’d break or at least change them. And if he agreed…”

A new voice broke in. “Then Susan still looks good because everyone at the party will get to see the boys. They’ll think she’s making an effort to resolve their differences. They’ll expect Tom to do the same.”

Pam and Rebecca turned to find Katie Jarrod approaching. Tall and thin like her son, she wore her silver hair short, in a stylish cut. A lovely, teal, beaded dress flowed gracefully around her while she carried in a tray of shrimp cocktail.

“That was very understanding of you to encourage Tom to see the boys this evening,” she told Pam. She set down the platter on the buffet table. “You’ve made this a doubly festive occasion.”

Pam wondered how she should respond, then noted tears rimming the older woman’s eyes. Without a second thought, she reached for her hand. Katie squeezed tight while her expression said thank you.

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“Hi Dad,” A.J. greeted cheerfully. He gave his father a big hug. Mark, always the more reserved of the two, stood there looking like he didn’t know quite what to do.

Tom scooped both boys up and buried himself in their embraces. Thank you so much, God, he prayed. Thank you protecting them. For keeping them healthy. For everything. His dad was right. They didn't hate him. In fact, they seemed fine. Even happy to see him. He wiped a tear on Mark's shirt before standing up to deal with their mother.

"Hey. What about me?" Tom Sr. asked.

Thrilled, the boys ran to their grandfather.

"Let's go find Grandma," Tom Sr. suggested. "I know she's anxious to get a look at the two of you."

Tom noticed A.J. glance at his mother for her approval. Ever so slightly, Susan gave him a nod.

They grabbed his dad's hands. "Let's go, Grandpa!"

"You're looking well, Thomas."

Tom could tell his ex-wife was making an enormous effort to appear civil. Maybe even pleasant. Even so, he detected a hiss at the end of his name. He waited until the boys were inside before turning his attention to her.

"You too." Knowing Susan as he did, Tom braced himself for the price she would expect him to pay in exchange for this seemingly magnanimous gesture on her part. He practically bit his tongue to stop from demanding to know what it would be. Instead, he thought back to the advice they'd received from a family mediator during the divorce proceedings.

"Keep your tone cordial," he'd told them. "Try to treat your exchange like a business meeting. You don't have to like a person to do business with them."

That guy was the only 'helping professional' Tom encountered who acted like he had any common sense. Tom even consulted with the man privately. But that was short lived. Sure the guy had a lot of insight. And even some other helpful suggestions. But Susan wasn't concerned with agreements. She enjoyed the fight—plain and simple. And she was good at it.

"When should I bring the boys back?"

"Aren't you going to invite me in? It looks like you're having quite a party."

The hurt-little-girl routine rubbed his already thin nerves raw. If she were a man, he'd tell her she had a lot of audacity to even suggest such a thing. She didn't want to go inside. She hated his parents. She'd said as

much to them and anyone else within earshot on more than one occasion. She just wanted to needle him. Please God, he prayed. I don't want a scene. Give me the right words to say.

"Hey, Jarrod! Whatcha doing out there?"

Eddie. Tom wasn't sure if he was God's response to his request, but he'd take it. "Thanks," he whispered to his best friend.

"Oh, Susan. Didn't we just see each other last Thursday. Isn't that twice too often in this decade?" Eddie chided.

Susan obviously seethed. Tom pursed his lips in a straight line to hold back a grin. Clearly, Eddie's presence infuriated her. For whatever reason, whenever he appeared, she usually backed away from whatever game she was playing.

Her eyes blazed with warning. "Bring them home by nine!"

"It's the weekend, cousin, and your ex's engagement party. Try as you might, you will not ruin it. The boys will be brought home by eleven." Then he waved. "Bye-bye."

Susan's eyes shot him with arrows. She scrunched up her lips, no doubt biting back something vile. Instead, she swung open the car door and angrily got behind the wheel. Eddie stepped forward and closed her inside. Then with an arm around Tom, he urged him toward the house. "Don't look back. If she runs us over, at least there will be plenty of witnesses."

Relieved to end the scene, Tom complied. He knew Susan would find a way to make him pay eventually, but for now he was thankful for the reprieve. "When are you going to tell me what you have on her that makes her listen to you?"

Eddie waved him off. "It's no big deal. Glad I could be of help. Now get your butt in there and find your kids and fiancée."

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"Grandma!" the boys called in union. The pounding footsteps bounced into the room and into Katie's arms.

Watching the scene, Pam held her breath to keep her eyes from welling. A.J. and Mark seemed genuinely happy to see their grandmother. And Katie's face beamed with pride and joy.

"You did good, kid," Eddie whispered to Pam.

Then she felt Tom's arm around her waist. "Have I told you today how much I love you?"

Pam couldn’t remember ever feeling so...she couldn’t even find a word to describe the warm and wanted feeling that washed over her. Thank you, Lord, she whispered. She leaned back against Tom and rested her hands on his.

Her gut reaction to include the boys at the party was simply that. It just seemed like the right thing to do. After all, they would soon be her stepsons. She really disliked that term. It made her recall an old episode from the Brady Bunch. Bobby got the off-the-wall idea that stepparents couldn’t love their stepkids as much as their “real” kids, so he ran away. When he returned, Carol Brady showed him the steps leading upstairs. She told him, “These are the only steps in this house.” And that’s how Pam felt.

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“I don’t know what I should do,” Tom said later.

Immediately, Pam understood what he was talking about. From their places, Eddie, Rebecca, Pam and Tom watched the boys in the adjoining room playing a game of Monopoly with their cousins. T.J. Jr. led the group, clearly enjoying his role as banker.

“What do you mean?” Eddie asked.

“I haven’t seen them in almost two years, and here we are acting like nothing happened. Should I try to explain? And what about Pam here? Should I be having them make an effort to get to know her?”

Pam had no idea. Sure, under ordinary circumstances she’d like that. But this was such a delicate situation.

Fortunately, Rebecca came to the rescue. Wiping barbeque sauce from her fingers, she said, “You’re doing fine. And they’re doing fine. Just leave them be. There’ll be plenty of time to get serious later.”

That sounded good to Pam. She just hoped Rebecca was right about there being time in the future. What if tonight was just a ruse to catch Tom off guard and try to interfere in their celebration? Then she stopped. Even if that was Susan’s intent, it had failed. It was a beautiful party.

With that thought in mind, Pam reminded herself she was not in control. All she could do was pray and do her best. God would handle the rest. She swallowed. From past experience, she knew sometimes that was easier said than done.

“Have you set a date yet?” Katie walked up and asked. “I know you mentioned sometime after Christmas, but everyone wants to know when.”

Pam’s gaze flew to Tom. Secretly, they had spoken earlier about the possibility of eloping. But now seeing all the trouble his mom went through for this evening and the hopeful look in her eyes, Pam gave Tom a look that said, She wants a wedding. A real wedding. She’d be crushed if she and your dad weren’t there.

Nodding, Tom placed his hand over hers. “How about March? The weekend that falls closest to the 17th?”

“It’s the anniversary of our first date,” Pam added, feeling her face flush.

Katie jumped to her feet. “Well, let’s get out the calendar.”

“My mom said there won’t be a wedding.”

All eyes focused on the innocent nine-year-old boy who had entered the room.

Truths Unveiled

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Chapter Thirty-Two

“Shut up, Mark!” A.J. ordered. He yanked his younger brother by the shirt back into the family room. “Don’t listen to him,” he told the adults while shaking his head. “He doesn’t understand stuff.”

“But that’s what Mom said,” Mark insisted. “I heard her.”

“I know,” A.J. whispered back. “But…”

Pam couldn’t overhear the rest of the boy’s comment.

“That’s to be expected,” Thomas Sr. said, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Pam wanted to look at Tom. What was he thinking? she wondered. She was sure she could handle almost anything Susan dished out. But what about him? Ultimately, that would determine their fate. Would he rise to the occasion and address his kids’ needs head on? Or would he be like so many fathers she’d seen in the hospital? Emotional cripples who closed themselves off because they couldn’t or wouldn’t handle their child’s illness or deformity. Those men forced their wives into handling everything alone, feeling isolated and abandoned, while the men basked in their misery.

Dear God, please, don’t let Tom do that, she prayed. I’m not coming here to trade one set of issues for another. I just can’t.

Taking a breath, Pam cast a sideways glance in his direction. To her surprise, she found him staring at her. Forming a semi-smile, he said, “I hope you believe in that ‘for better or worse’ stuff.”

****

“Pam seems nice, Dad,” A.J. commented. He and his brother sat buckled in the back seat of the truck. Tom took his seat up front and checked the rearview mirror. Mark was already asleep. Tom’s father had offered to go along for the ride to Susan’s house. From the front passenger’s seat, he gave Tom a confident wink.

“I’m glad you think so, son. I do, too.” Again, Tom marveled at his children’s resilience. They’d been through a lot, and yet tonight it was as if their separation from him never occurred. He’d so many questions he wanted to ask them. So many assurances he wanted to offer. But where should he start?

“Mom doesn’t like her.”

From out of the mouths of babes, Tom thought, while maneuvering out of the long driveway. Well, honesty is always the best response to honesty. No sense sugar coating it. “No, A.J., I don’t think she does.”

“Will I see you again, Dad?”

Okay, another zinger to the heart. Please, God. Give me the right words. “Of course you’ll see me again, A.J. I’m your dad. I’m not sure exactly when, but I hope it’s real soon.”

“Mom’s mad at you.”

“You think? I had no idea.” Tom couldn’t help himself. He knew he shouldn’t joke but the entire situation just seemed so absurd. There were no answers. No road map. Only potholes and ditches. One right after the other.

A.J. caught the sarcasm and giggled. “Don’t worry, Dad. It will be okay.”

Tom’s heart went out to his young son. His own child was offering him encouragement. “I know it will be, A.J. And I don’t want you to worry, either. The problem is between your mom and me. Not with you and Mark. We both love you no matter what.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

Tom turned down Susan’s street, gulping back a quiet sob. Susan’s porch lights lit up most of the front lawn.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?” he glanced in the mirror. But before A.J. could answer, his mother opened the door and stepped onto the porch.

In a flash, his son’s demeanor changed. “Ah, nothing,” he said hurriedly. He poked his sleeping brother. “Come on, Mark. We gotta go.”

The distress Tom witnessed in A.J. mirrored his own. Even just anticipating Susan’s presence set Tom’s nerve endings on alert. Why does she have this effect on people? His heart broke for his boys. Living with Susan had taught him how to walk on eggshells all the time. He’d hated it. That wasn’t what he wanted for them. Yet there seemed no alternative.

Susan, dressed in a fancy black lounging outfit, met them in the driveway. He gripped the steering wheel. She wanted to talk. He knew she would. He tried to think of a way to avoid her, but knew it wouldn’t be possible without causing a scene in front of the kids. She was an expert at boxing people in like that.

“I need to talk to you,” she said predictably, after sending the boys inside. Tom had stepped out of the truck to hug them goodbye. Now, he got

back inside and lowered the window. He looked to his dad. Tom, Sr. sat quietly in the passenger seat.

“Okay. Go ahead.”

“Do you want to come in?”

Tom recoiled, as if to say, “Are you nuts?” But he held his tongue. “Thanks, but I’ve got to get back.”

“I don’t want to argue anymore.”

Tom nodded. “Me neither.”

“How were the boys?”

Tom thought of a million nasty things he could have said like, Fine. Considering you tried to poison them against me. But he held back. That wouldn’t help anyone. “Great. They got to see their cousins and the rest of the family. It was a good time.”

“So Pam’s staying? She’s going to take the job at the medical center?”

“Yes.”

Straightening, Susan folded her arms across her chest. “Have you set a wedding date?”

“Not yet.” They had, but she didn’t need to know.

“Don’t you think we should settle our property dispute before the wedding? That way you’ll have nothing to distract you on your honeymoon.”

Tom kept his voice level even as his skin crawled. “That’s very considerate of you. What did you have in mind?”

“I want that property, Tom. I’ll pay you double what it’s worth. Take it. It’s a good deal.”

“That’s very generous,” he agreed. “But I just don’t think so.” He saw fire ignite in her eyes, the same fire that always smoldered beneath the surface ready to flash out at any given moment.

She narrowed her eyes. “Then I don’t think it’s particularly healthy for A.J. and Mark to be exposed to a stepmother at this point, especially when the woman got away with vehicular manslaughter.”

Tom saw red. He reached for the door handle and started to leap from the truck but his father held him back.

“Keep quiet, Thomas!” he hissed. “She’s just baiting you.”

Smirking, Susan stood there in the moonlight and watched Tom pull out of the driveway.

Beyond fury, Tom used every ounce of self control not to peel down the street. Desperate, he needed to vent his frustration. But then he realized it wouldn’t change a thing. And he’d look like a fool. Susan was Susan. To hope she’d change was just an act of futility.

“I think your mom and I are going to file something in the court to get grandparents’ visitation,” Tom Sr. declared. “What are your thoughts about that?”

Weary, Tom rubbed his forehead. “Thanks, Dad. But I don’t want to get you involved. You know her. The situation’s hopeless.”

“Maybe, but Mom and I have been patient long enough. Those kids are our grandchildren. I say it looks like Susan needs a little reminder of that fact.”

“I don’t know. She’s up to something. I can feel it.”

“You could be right. That’s why now may be a good time for us to go to court. We should have done it years ago.”

Tom looked at his father and noticed a sly smile creeping around his mouth. “She’ll get nasty.”

Tom Sr. nodded. “I’m counting on it.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Can I come in?”

It was Tom. Pam glanced in the dresser mirror in his old room. Yikes! She’d just gotten out of the shower. Her hair was still wet, and she didn’t have a stroke of makeup on her face. As planned, they got up early to eat breakfast together before going to the nine o’clock church service.

It would be her first church experience in several years. She reached for a pair of jeans, trying not to think about it. Still, her insecurities managed to slip through, including the fact that it would bring her face-to-face with all of Middleton. Some people were bound to remember her.

Pam mentioned her nervousness to Tom the night before. They hadn’t heard from the creep since earlier in the week while they were still in Boston. Would her appearance in church spur him back into action? In a way, Pam hoped so. The more strikes taken against her, the easier it would be to catch the coward. Though she wasn’t totally convinced of her innocence in the accident, if she was going to move here and start a new life with Tom, she needed this person exposed immediately.

“Sure, Tom. Be right there.” Seconds later, Pam turned the doorknob and found herself wrapped in his arms. He ran his fingers through her hair and nuzzled her neck. “Boy, I can’t wait to get used to this.”

Pam released a small sigh. Again, something else she’d been missing and hadn’t even realized it. Four weeks, she reminded herself. In four weeks, I’ll be here for good.

“How about calling Boston to say you’re taking all your vacation and sick time now? We’ll hire movers and they can bring all your stuff down here. Then you won’t need to go back at all.”

“Don’t tempt me,” she replied dreamily. She had a million and one little things to do before the big move, including putting her condo on the market. In some ways, she felt anxious to get started. But still, she dreaded leaving Tom.

“Then we could move up the wedding to next week. We could be on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean by the weekend!”

Imaging the scene, Pam dreamingly led Tom into the kitchen. “That sounds wonderful. Do you have a particular island in mind?”

“Mom’s already working on it,” he said, tilting his head to the counter. Then he brought a basket of homemade muffins to the table, while Pam eyed a pile of travel brochures.

Pam stood and grabbed silverware, plates and coffee mugs. She set the table. “Gee, she works fast.”

“Aunt Emily is a travel agent. She brought the stuff over at the crack of dawn this morning.”

As they ate, they coordinated their schedules and made a list of things that needed to be done before the wedding.

“So it’s March twenty-first,” Tom confirmed. Then he asked, “Are you sure that’s enough time?”

“Enough time for what?”

“You know. To get all those frilly, lacy things girls buy for their honeymoon.”

Pam laughed. “Frilly, lacy things?”

Tom stood up and grabbed her up from her chair. Holding her around the waist, he twirled her off her feet. “Yes,” he assured her. “They’re very important. You can never have enough. Think of all the opportunities I’ll get to slip them off you.” His lips met hers with a lingering kiss.

Pam felt her insides turn to mush. So this is what it’s really like, she thought, enjoying Tom’s deep kiss. After a long moment, they parted and rested their foreheads against each other.

“Whew!” Tom whistled. “We’d better get married quick! I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to hold out!”

Feeling the heat rise from her middle and throughout her entire body, Pam smiled. “About those honeymoon plans. I’ll take a look in the newspaper. The travel agencies usually have lots of ads running on Sundays.”

“Interesting change of subject.”

Pam felt her face burn.

Tom laughed and reached for the newspaper, handing her the travel sections. Eyeing that, and the other thin section of the newspaper, she ignored the fact that the Boston Globe’s Sunday edition was at least triple in size. I’m sure I can get a subscription, she told herself. It’s not a big deal.

Without warning, Tom jumped up, sending the paper he was reading to the floor. Grabbing her hands, he pulled her up. “Let’s go out for breakfast.”

Pam frowned. “Ah, we’re already eating.”

He shook his head and handed her a jacket. “Nah. This doesn’t count. Here, put this on. Before we go, we can check out the barn. I know how you love cows. Maybe Lucy’s close to having her baby.”

Pam shrugged. “Okay. I’ll clean up here first...”

“NO!” Tom practically shouted.

She studied his face. His mouth drew into a tight line and he wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Tom, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he insisted. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout. Let’s just go.”

She was about to say she wanted to use the bathroom but the phone rang.

“Ignore it,” he said, taking the jacket and draping it around her shoulders.

“Why? What’s going on?”

The answering machine beeped. “Tom? Pick up.”

Pam recognized Katie’s voice.

“It’s Mom. You may want to look at—” Tom clicked off the machine. Pam didn’t hear the rest of the message, but she still retrieved the newspaper from the floor.

Then she caught the headline. “Boston Doctor Involved in Death of Two Area Teens Returns to Middleton to Wed Local Farmer.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty-Four

Tom pulled Pam toward him and held her tight. They stood in the airport's waiting area, listening for her flight to be called. "I don't want you to go," he told her. If he was honest, he'd admit he wasn't sure which was worse: Boston, because of the distance and their separation, or Middleton where some jerk got his jollies by trying to harass her.

On the outside, Pam seemed to take the article well. Much better than he'd hoped. She frowned when she read it but said little. Nor did she withdraw like he'd seen her do in the past. Sticking to their plan, they went to church. At first, she appeared tense but eventually calmed down. And everyone they met welcomed her warmly.

After the service, they went back to Tom's house with his parents and the Cartwrights for leftovers from the party the night before. The Housers and a few other area families stopped by later in the day.

On Monday, Tom got back into his routine at the farm and then the rescue station. Fortunately, no major incidents had occurred in his absence. Meanwhile, Pam spent the day at the medical center, filling out forms and taking care of administrative issues. Now it was Tuesday morning. Time for her to head back to Boston.

Though Tom didn't think the newspaper article was that bad, there was no reason for it. The story was old news. In addition, he was sure it revived Pam's greatest fears. Instead of stating that Ryan Collins was dangerously intoxicated and the cause of the accident, it reported that the accident was alcohol and weather related. Why?

Tom also wondered about the purpose behind the article. Obviously, the reporter knew Pam was moving back to the area. Why did she, or anyone else, need to be reminded of that horrible incident? At the very least, the reporter could have said she'd been exonerated from any wrong doing. But he didn't. Just wait until he got a hold of that reporter! Someone put the guy up to it. And Tom was determined to find out who it was.

"I've got to go," Pam whispered. "They just called my flight." She appeared cheerful but Tom knew she felt exposed. No one wanted people whispering about them behind their back. Unfortunately, though he hated to admit it, that's exactly what the article served to do. At least Pam would be

away from it this week. Providing, of course, there were no other reminders.

That thought made Tom edgy. He repeated the reporter's name in his head. A freelancer. He wasn't familiar with the man's other works. He planned to remedy that and soon! For now, watching Pam start to leave, he pulled out his wallet and credit card. "Wait! I'm going with you!" There was still time. He could fly standby.

Pam placed her hands on his chest and met his eyes. "I'd love that. You know I would. But I've got to work. What would you do with yourself there? Think about all the stuff you've got going on here: The hospital, the zoning board meeting, and your sons. Eddie mentioned Susan said she'd call and work out a visitation schedule with you." Pam paused and traced the V neck of his shirt. "It's what you've been praying for."

Tom held her hands against his heart. Suddenly, he felt a laugh bubble to the surface.

Pam smiled. "Okay, I give up. What's so funny?"

He shook his head, trying to keep a straight face. "You're right. I did pray to be reunited with A.J. and Mark. I also prayed to be reunited with you. And suddenly, I have it. It's all I've ever asked for."

"I was thinking the same thing."

Still laughing, Tom leaned his forehead against hers. "And then we have you. All these years, feeling like you did something wrong when you really didn't. So God sends you back to Middleton, back to me, and we get the accident thing pretty much straightened out. The only problem now is that loose cannon going around trying to dredge up the past!"

Pam giggled. "Clearly, God has His own time table, and His own ideas about what He wants."

"Either that or He has a wild sense of humor!"

With that, Tom found Pam's lips and kissed her deeply, inhaling the fresh scent of her skin and shampoo. Please take care of her, Lord, he prayed. Keep her safe and help me do what I need to do in order to help her, A.J., Mark and…

Tom was so caught up in trying to cover every contingency in the prayer that he didn't hear the boarding call. Pam kissed him and pulled away.

"I love you," she said, running her fingers against his cheek. "See you soon."

“Not soon enough.” Tom quickly kissed her again. “Now you’re sure you’ve got a ride home from the airport? And your friend from the car dealership will give you a loaner for a few weeks?”

“I promise. I’ve known him and his family for years.” She blew him one more kiss as she walked backward down the restricted corridor.

“Call me as soon as you land. I’ll be waiting!”

Tom stayed until the 747 lifted into the clouds. Then he made a mental list of all he needed to do.

Walking back to his Avalanche, he felt his cell phone vibrate on his hip. He checked the number, then flipped open the phone. Good. Just the person he wanted to reach.

Truths Unveiled

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Chapter Thirty-Five

“Look at you!” Marty Lewis teased.

Pam sat at a table in the hospital’s cafeteria, cheerfully dunking a chocolate chip cookie into a glass of milk. Smiling, she pointed to the chair across from her. “Do you have a second?”

The hospital administrator nodded and sat down. “Three weeks ago, you left here looking like you were on your way to a funeral. And now you’re so…” He searched for the right word. “Bubbly!”

Pam beamed. “You have yourself to thank for that.”

“What ever do you mean?” he asked, feigning innocence. He busied himself with pouring a packet of sugar into his coffee. Then he glanced up at her. “So tell me what happened in Middleton? Did you like the place?”

Pam held out her left hand. The doctor had been her boss and her mentor for the past decade. Before that, he’d been her orthopedic surgeon. She also considered him to be a close friend. It was he who first told her about Marlene Everett’s move to Middleton and the available ED opening there.

“I guess you did,” Marty bellowed. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Tom Jarrod. He’s Middleton’s chief of rescue operations.”

“And your high school sweetheart?”

Pam blushed. “So you knew.” There wasn’t much Marty didn’t know in the medical community. She was sure he’d been given a full report about her visit.

“Just a few rumors,” he assured her. “Nothing concrete.” Then he winked. “But I take full credit.”

Suddenly, Pam felt sheepish. “You don’t think it’s too soon?”

Marty laughed. “For you? Pamela Harrington, I’ve known you forever. Never in all that time did I ever witness you do anything impulsively. In fact, you are the slowest, most methodical, analyzing, aggravating person I’ve ever met!”

Pam felt the heat rise to her face.

“And with that said, let me add that since he was your high school sweetheart, don’t you think it’s about time? When do I get to meet him?”

Her cheeks burned brighter. “He’ll be up this weekend to help me pack.”

“So, do I take it this is the beginning of your notice?” Marty’s words were businesslike, but his expression told her he was happy for her. She had completed her emergency physician fellowship at Boston Community Hospital the previous year and accepted a year-long contract that contained a renewal clause. She loved Boston Community. The only reason she’d consider leaving would be to work with Marlene Everett. Supposedly in Chicago. Or so she’d thought.

Marty held out his hand. “Congratulations.”

Pam’s eyes filled as she wrapped both hands around his. “You’re the best, Marty.”

And he was. After the accident, when her parents had brought her to Boston, Marty handled all of her surgeries. From the beginning, he took charge of her entire treatment and rehabilitation. Was he also her ticket into Boston Community Hospital after med school? Maybe, but she did graduated third in her class at Harvard, number one went to New York and number two went to Los Angeles. Even in critical analysis of herself, she believed she’d earned it. Still, she felt indebted to this man. His healing touch and constant support played a direct role in teaching her how to walk again and how to excel academically and on the job.

“Middleton’s lucky to have you,” Marty told her. “And so is this fellow. Just be sure to stay in touch.”

“Always,” she promised.

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Pam arrived back at her condo after seven the following morning. Though tired from a long overnight ED shift, she also felt invigorated. Yes, Sunday’s newspaper article irked her, but she’d come to terms with it. The hypnosis had helped that. It gave her a clearer picture of what happened. She still didn’t have all the answers. But for now, she had enough. People were going to talk. She couldn’t stop it. But she only cared about what Tom, his family and the staff at the medical center thought. If they could handle it, so could she.

Focusing on Tom, Pam’s lips automatically climbed up in a smile. He planned to fly into Boston the next night. They’d spent the past four days apart but constantly connected by cell phone and e-mail. Thank goodness for modern technology, she mused. She couldn’t remember ever being so happy.

As Pam slipped the key into the deadbolt, her front door swung open. “Did I forget to lock up?” Frowning, she walked inside. I guess anything is possible. Things had been so hectic lately. Stepping inside, she suddenly gasped. All her possessions in the living room lay in a heap on the floor, either ripped or destroyed. Granted, she wasn’t the best housekeeper, but even she couldn’t make this big of a mess. Then it hit her! And she knew what had happened.

On instinct, she started to run inside and assess the damage, but then stopped. She knew enough about police procedures to avoid touching anything. Not that the Boston police department had time to check for fingerprints. Burglaries in this city were far too common. But still. Just in case…

Pam’s next thought was to flee. Run outside and call the cops. Call Tom. She reached into her purse for her cell phone, but her hands were shaking so bad it slipped from her grasp. Forcing her hands to steady, she reached down and grabbed the phone to dial 911. Then it occurred to her that the burglar might still be somewhere inside the condo. After all, she had two bedrooms and a den on the second floor. This realization made her leap back from the door to her condo.

Trying to steady her trembling limbs, she tiptoed forward and softly closed her door. Now she needed to call the police.

Then she felt someone seize her from behind. She couldn’t breathe and her heart froze.

“I’ve got you now!” A deep voice whispered in her ear.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty-Six

Pam screamed at the top of her lungs, kicking and fighting the strong arms holding her tight.

"Hey! It's me!" Tom turned her around to face him. "What's wrong?"

It took a second to sink in. "Tom!" Pam gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"More to the point," he answered, placing a hand on each of her shoulders. "What are you doing? I didn't mean to scare you. Are you okay?"

Pam held up a hand. "Just a second." Relieved to see him, and not the big, bad boogie man she'd envisioned, she paused to catch her breath and try to calm down. "You're early," she managed, in between jagged breaths. "I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"That's called a surprise, silly."

Vigorously, she nodded. "Believe me. I'm surprised."

He moved to the door. "Let's go inside. It's cold out here."

"Wait!" She grabbed his arm. "Someone broke in!"

"What!" Tom moved her to the side and entered the condo. "Did you call the cops?"

She held up her cell phone. "I'm doing it now."

"Good. I'll be right back. You stay here."

"Right," she muttered, following close behind.

When he reached the living room, he let out a loud whistle and rested his hands on his hips. "Yup. It looks like someone paid you a visit, all right. I'll check the other rooms." Careful not to disturb anything, he stepped through the mess. Her piles of mail and medical journals lay thrown on the floor along with all the books from the numerous shelves lining one wall of the room. The coffee table lay on its side next to her shattered Lenox coasters and a crystal vase. Seeing them, she thought instantly of her mother who'd given them to her. Barbara would not be pleased.

After making the call and reporting the crime, Pam hung up and rubbed her goose-bumped arms. Where should I start? she wondered. What could be missing? She really didn't own anything of value. She wore all of her good jewelry. She glanced at the opposite corner of the room. Nope. The

television, DVD player and stereo were still there. Crashed and on the floor, but still there.

“Whoever did this is a pig!” Tom ranted from the other room.

She found him in her home office, assessing the damage done to her computer.

“Oh no! I just bought that!” She pointed to an antique stethoscope lying bent and broken on the desk.

“Don’t touch it!” Tom warned.

“I know. Heck, I can’t even get to it. There’s so much crap on the floor. He trashed all the books off these shelves, too!”

Tom held out his hand to her. “Do you notice anything missing?’

It’s hard to tell,” Pam shrugged. Together they walked back to the living room. “I haven’t been upstairs, but I’d have thought that they would take the computer, even if they wrecked everything else.”

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“I’ll need a list of what’s missing,” the older cop told her. “Your insurance company will want one too.”

Pam nodded. Again she glanced around at the mess. The thought of cleaning it up boggled her mind. She watched as the younger cop, clearly fresh out of the academy, photographed the broken television and other items. Seeming satisfied, he headed for the next room.

What was the point of all this? Who would break in like this? And what did they want?

“Have there been any burglaries in the area?”

“A few. But none on this street. Then again...” the policeman began checking off boxes on a form. “That doesn’t mean anything. This is a big city. There are lots of nutcases lurking around.”

“This looks more like vandalism,” the other officer added. He walked back into the living room. “Or like someone expected to find something.”

The older officer continued to take notes. “Can you think of anyone who might have done this?”

Pam shot Tom a warning glare across the room. His return glare told her he was thinking the same thing. Too bad.

She turned back to the officers. “No. None.”

Ten minutes later, Tom walked the officers outside. Annoyed at the clean-up job ahead of her, Pam sighed and grabbed a broom and dustpan.

When Tom returned, she had swept up three bags full of glass and broken dishes.

“I didn’t even make a dent,” she complained.

With a smile, he opened his arms. “Come here.”

Held tight in his warm embrace, she pushed everything aside for a moment and thanked God for bringing this man into her life.

After a long moment, Tom tilted her chin upward for her eyes to meet his.

“How about we just pack up what you want to take? We can hire movers to get the furniture and a cleaning company to handle the rest.”

Pam blew her bangs. “Sure. Sounds good.”

“And come back with me Sunday. For good.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“You ladies are something else,” Eddie teased. He lifted a box out of the moving truck. “You all pack the same way.”

“Which is?” his wife, Rebecca, inquired while carrying a plant in each hand.

“You just throw everything in boxes and expect us men to lug it around for you.”

Rebecca winked at Pam. “Sounds about right. Doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Except even I didn’t think I owned this much stuff.” She surveyed the dozen boxes lined up in front of the door to the apartment the medical center provided. Then she looked to the still half-full truck and groaned. This was not how she imagined the move. She could have stayed in Boston a while longer and used the time to organize everything. Especially since they’d learned that the break-in had not been an isolated incident. In fact, within a few days, a rash of break-ins in her condo complex followed, all supposedly ransacked the same way as hers. But Tom stood firm. Finally compromising, they moved her two weeks later, instead of the four she’d originally planned. And they moved the wedding up to January.

Pam heard Tom’s footsteps behind her. Leaning her head against his shoulder, she instantly stopped second guessing herself. Burglary or not, they’d been apart long enough. And wasn’t it convenient that Marty had already selected a candidate to replace her?

As arranged, Pam and Tom met the doctor and his wife for dinner at Legal Seafood the night before her move.

“You’ve got six weeks of vacation time coming,” he told her, laughing. “And because of our stingy employment policies, you’re going to lose them all. Of course you should take these next few weeks.”

Then he looked to Tom. “Can you believe she has all that time saved up? We couldn’t get rid of her.”

That gave everyone at the table something to chuckle about, Pam included. But still, it felt a little weird being so easily replaced. Oh, well. It probably meant it was time for her to be moving on.

Eddie’s huffing and puffing brought her back to the present. “What time is it?” he asked. He carried a vacuum cleaner and an ironing board.

Pam looked at her watch. “Seven-twenty-seven. Why?” She sat on the floor, unpacking the last of the three boxes of books she wanted to keep available.

“Because.” He held up the two items, then set them on the floor. “This is the last of it. The moving truck is finally empty!”

“Just in time,” Rebecca announced.

Pam turned and found her new friend looking out the window leading to the street.

“I think I see the pizza guy pulling into the parking lot.”

Eddie scratched his broad stomach. “Good. I’m starved.” He came over to Pam. “Now that you’re pretty well unpacked, have you figured out what was stolen?”

Still slightly annoyed about the break-in, Pam shook her head and handed him a fat medical book to put on the cramped shelf. “I can’t believe he or she just wanted to trash the place. The only thing I can’t seem to find is my high school yearbook. And I’m sure no one would take that. It probably got mixed up with the other books that are still boxed up.”

She shrugged and stood. “It’s no big deal.” But it was. That yearbook contained her last happy memories of Megan. The day before the accident they’d written in each other’s books, taking up the entire last page. They wrote about the past two years, and all the crazy things they’d done together. Then they’d moved to the future.

Megan planned to start studying Northeastern University’s journalism program that fall. With Pam at Harvard, they’d only be a few miles apart. They already decided they’d rent an apartment together the summer after their freshman year.

Hearing the doorbell, Pam went to help Rebecca with the pizza.

“Hey, Eddie!” Tom called out. “Give me a hand over here.”

Smiling, she watched them figure out how to set up the new television bought to replace the one lost in the burglary. Apparently, the task took more effort than expected.

Pam blew him a kiss as she and Rebecca gathered paper plates and silverware to set the small dinette table that came with the apartment. She still felt totally disorganized in her new, temporary home, but at least they’d emptied most of the boxes.

Minutes after they sat down to eat, they heard a car pull up outside. Muted voices over a radio followed. Who could that be? Pam wondered.

She watched Tom and Eddie rise and go to the door. “Maybe it’s just Warren, the property manager, checking on us,” she suggested. She and Rebecca had met him when he showed them the apartment. He was a nice, older gentleman, who lived in the apartment on the first floor with his wife.

“Bill, good to see you,” she heard Tom say. “Come on in.”

From her seat, Pam could see a man standing in her doorway wearing a navy police uniform. He removed his hat.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Of course not,” Tom replied, ushering him inside. “Have a slice of pizza. We’ve got some salad over here, too.” Leading the way, he added, “Pam, this is the deputy chief I told you about. Bill Houser, meet Pam Harrington.”

Nodding, Pam held out a plate for him. “Please join us.”

“Yeah,” Eddie agreed, helping himself to more food. “Grab a chair.”

“Thanks. But I’m just stopping by to see how the move’s going. I don’t want to interrupt your dinner. I can come by another time.”

“No way,” Tom told him. “What can I get you to drink?”

The deputy accepted a Coke as Eddie asked, “Anything new on the accident bandit?”

Houser shook his head. “As a matter-of-fact...no. I met with Megan’s brother and the Collins family. Neither of them seemed to express any animosity toward you, Ms. Harrington.”

Pam remained quiet. There had been no contact with the “bandit” since that phone call at her condo in Boston. That was almost two weeks ago and it was fine with her. Maybe he or she decided to back off now that Houser had reopened the investigation.

“Do you have those photos of the accident scene?” Eddie asked. His mouth filled with food, which he washed down with a swig of soda from the bottle. “I want to take a look at them again. I still can’t believe there’s only three. That just doesn’t sound right.”

Bill shook his head. “Sorry. They’re at the office.”

“I’ve got photocopies in my truck,” Tom offered. “They’re not great but you can get a general gist. Be right back.”

Pam’s head began to swim. She recalled seeing some pictures years ago while still in the hospital, but she couldn’t remember what they showed. Nor did she want to be reminded. Now, it seemed unavoidable.

“You okay?”

She raised her eyes to find Tom peering at her intently. He held a large manila envelope in his hand.

“Sure.” She stood and began to clear the table.

“Sorry,” Tom whispered, following her to the sink. “I guess it’s a guy thing. I want to solve the mystery. I want to find out who’s bothering you and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Pam loaded the dishwasher with the dirty silverware and glasses. “It’s okay.” And it was—in her head. That’s why she didn’t understand it suddenly bothering her again. She thought she’d put it behind her. Now, the pain felt fresh, like it touched every nerve-ending inside her. It might as well have just happened yesterday.

Pam closed the dishwasher, then turned to face him. Arching an eyebrow, she cast him a dubious smile. “You want me to look at the photographs.”

Tom pulled her into a tight bear hug. “See? That’s why we’re so good together. We think so much alike.”

“So that’s why.” She allowed herself to be led back to the table, then she stopped. Unexpectedly, tears welled up in her eyes. “I don’t want to see any blood and gore,” she warned. She dealt with it every day in the hospital, but this was a different matter entirely.

Tom nodded. “We’ve only got one of the car crash. Just take a look and see if it fits with what you recalled under hypnosis. Okay?”

“Maybe we should go,” Rebecca suggested.

Insistent, Pam shook her head. “No. I want you to stay. This will just take a minute.” Bracing herself, she watched Tom remove the photo from the envelope. Studying it, she shrugged.

“What do you think?” Houser asked.

Pam shook her head. Relief, mixed with curiosity, washed over her. “Nothing. It means nothing.”

“And after all this time, you still have no idea who or why someone would want to bring up the accident again?” Houser asked.

“Not a clue.”

Houser rose and started looking about the three-room apartment. “How sturdy are the locks on the doors and windows?”

“I’ve got some dead bolts in my truck,” Tom told him. “They’ll be on before I leave tonight.”

“Good. What about the phone? Did you hook up the caller ID?”

“Yes,” Pam said.

Seeming satisfied, Houser nodded and started for the door. “Well, I’m glad I got to catch up with you. I’ll be in touch if anything develops. And you do the same. I’ll also be sure to check up on you periodically.”

“Thanks, Bill,” Pam replied, suddenly feeling spooked about the idea of staying in the apartment alone. Stop, she scolded herself. You’ve been living alone for more than a decade.

Yes, but in Boston, not Middleton, she heard a tiny inner voice say.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Marlene Everett met Pam with a huge smile and a warm hug. “Welcome!”

Not one to sit around, Pam had arranged to meet with her new boss first thing Monday morning.

“I’m so glad you are able to start so soon,” Marlene told her. “We can use the help.” She offered Pam a chair while she appeared to look for something on her cluttered desk. “Ah, here it is.” She held out a white folder. “Your schedule. If possible, I’d like to start you in the ED on Wednesday, first shift.”

“Sure,” Pam agreed, taking the documents.

“And I’ll need to know how much time you’re taking off for your honeymoon so I can arrange coverage.”

“She’ll need two weeks.”

Pam turned around to find Tom standing behind her, grinning.

“Sounds nice,” Marlene approved. She sat down behind her desk. “Where are you going?”

“Yeah?” Pam asked him. “Where are we going?” Last thing she knew, they’d narrowed the list down to five places.

“Just be sure to give me the dates,” the doctor told them, smiling.

“Will do.” As he saluted, his portable radio crackled. “If I had my way, we’d leave tonight.” With that, he gave Pam a peck on the cheek and a nod to Marlene, then disappeared.

Somewhere between mortified and ecstatic, Pam settled back in her chair.

“He’s glad you’re here.”

Relieved at Marlene’s supportive tone, Pam met her inquiring gaze.

Marlene said, “I hope you don’t think I’m out of line with what I’m going to say, but you’ll find out soon enough I’m not one to hold things back.”

Last week’s newspaper article! Pam’s thoughts shouted. She held back a sigh and tried not to panic. The accident is no secret, she reminded herself. There’s no reason to freak out. But still. This woman was her boss. Surely she must have questions. Bracing herself, Pam nodded. “Feel free.”

“From what I’ve learned, your decision to come here couldn’t have been easy.”

Pam cleared her throat. “The hardest part was coming down for the interview a few weeks back. Everything’s fine now.”

“I’m sure it is.” Marlene smiled. “And at the same time, people can be cruel. I want you to know you have nothing to worry about here. I knew about the accident before I contacted you about the job. What’s past is past. You and I live with the results of tragedy every day. Remember that and try not to be too hard on yourself.”

At a loss for words, Pam could only offer a slight nod.

Marlene rose and extended her hand. “I’m looking forward to working with you. And…” She paused, then added, “I hope we become good friends.”

Swallowing the huge lump at the base of her throat, Pam nodded. “I’d really like that.”

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Tom whistled. “Look at you!”

Dressed in a navy velvet, strapless gown, Pam met him at the door to her apartment. The medical center had invited them to a formal dinner dance that night to introduce its facility and staff to other medical professionals it hoped to recruit.

“Thank you, kind sir,” she replied, accepting his warm lips. It was like they’d never been apart. Please God, if this is a dream, don’t wake me up.

Stepping away, she took stock of Tom. Tall and lean, the black tux fit him perfectly and showed off a more polished side of his typically rugged, down-to-earth good looks. Sending him a teasing chuckle, she brushed the jacket’s satin lapels. “And here I thought I’d finally get to see you wearing a tie. It’s amazing how you managed to find a tux that didn’t require one.”

Tom fingered the pleaded white shirt’s tailored collar, pretending to choke. “No kidding. Finally some guy designer had the nerve to do away with them, but my neck still feels like it’s caught in a noose.”

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At the dinner, Pam met dozens of her new colleagues. She recognized many of their names from published articles in medical journals and conferences she’d attended. She doubted she’d get this much exposure even in Chicago. Again, she marveled at the recent events in her life. Who could have guessed she’d be back in Middleton, and under these circumstances?

“How are you finding MMC so far?”

Pam smiled at Carl Tedford, standing to her left in the buffet line. “I like it very much,” she told him, spooning shrimp cocktail onto her plate. If she remembered correctly, he directed the hospital’s psychiatric unit. They’d met briefly during her first visit to the hospital.

Speaking with Tedford now, Pam felt a renewed sense that they had met elsewhere. She started to ask him but he spoke first.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

Curious, Pam nodded. “Sure.” She seized a miniature quiche. Minutes before, Tom had received an unexpected call from the rescue station. Not wanting to seem rude by using a cell phone in the middle of the formal affair, he left to find a better location.

“You’ll find out soon enough, but I wanted you to hear it from me.”

Pam felt that familiar warning, tingling sensation start at the base of her neck again. Stop being so paranoid, she scolded herself. People have more on their minds than you and what happened over a decade before. She took a sip of her drink and urged him to continue.

“You and I have a lot in common.”

I doubt that, Pam thought. Most shrinks annoyed her. But that was just her personal opinion. To him she replied, “That could be. After all, we’re both doctors. Where are you from originally?”

“Ryan Collins was my best friend.”

Cold liquid soaked Pam’s hand. She looked down at the shrimp sliding off her plate, onto her trembling hand. She placed the plate on a nearby table. Carl Tedford followed her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, not meeting his eyes.

“It still bothers me. The accident, I mean. I was with him that night.”

The noise blaring in Pam’s head made it difficult to hear him. His voice sounded so distant. Like he was reliving the scene. Part of her screamed for her to leave. Yet another part kept her feet weighted in place like cement.

“Sure, we were partying. It was senior week. Everybody was. But we smoked weed. We hardly touched the booze.”

Stunned by this new piece of information, Pam jerked up her head to meet his eyes. There she found a deep sadness. Much like she’d often felt herself. They’d both lost their closest friend under horrible circumstances. But there was more. In his steely gaze, she saw questions. Questions that demanded answers. “But I thought…”

Tedford interrupted her. “I could never figure out why the cops said he was drunk. And that he caused the accident. It didn’t make sense. It still doesn’t.”

The tingling sensation Pam felt at the base of her neck turned into a full-fledged red alert. To her surprise, he grabbed her forearm and stared at her intently. “I can’t let him continue taking the blame for something he didn’t do.” Then he put down his plate and left the room.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Late into the night, back in her apartment, Pam tossed from one side of the bed to the other, unable to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Carl Tedford's face. He believed his best friend had been framed. But how? she wondered. And why?

He blamed her. She saw it in his eyes. The suspicion. The unspoken accusations that she was responsible.

At some point, Pam must have fallen into a half sleep. She found herself at the crash site. Rain pelted her face, almost drowning her. Lightning flashed. She could hear rolling thunder as she lay paralyzed on the ground. Another flash of lightning showed the figure of a man, dragging something. He was yelling. No, he might be sobbing. She couldn't tell. Twigs broke nearby. Leaves rustled.

Pam felt the weight of footsteps coming toward her. She tried to call for help but no sound came out. The man stood over her. She couldn't see his face but she heard him. He struck her. Hard. Across the face. He grabbed her arms and tried to drag her. But she was stuck. She couldn't move her legs. The pain was excruciating.

"It's all your fault!" he shouted over and over again. "Your fault! You killed them! You ruined everything!"

Lightning flashed again. She saw him holding something in his hands. Helpless, she watched him raise it high in the air. He was yelling, but his words were garbled. He was going to strike her. But she could do nothing to stop him. She stiffened, waiting for the blow.

Suddenly awake, soaked with sweat, Pam shot upright. She fumbled for the lamp. The sound of her pounding heart filled her ears. Then, right before the light switched on, she heard a faint, strange noise. Or did she? She held her head in her hands, trying to clear the nightmare's awful visions and sounds.

There. She heard it again. A creaking sound. From the other room. Trying to calm her breathing, she tuned her ears to the silence.

After a few moments, Pam sighed. It was nothing. She shut her eyes, only to be startled by another noise. This time it was a rustling sound. Like paper. And it was real. Someone was inside the apartment.

Now she knew what it felt like to be paralyzed by fear. Unable to move, she fixed her eyes on the open doorway leading to the living room. What would she do if someone walked in? What did they want? Of course she'd left both portable phones and her cell in the other room. You're such an idiot! she yelled to herself. She tried to scream but nothing came out. It was like in the dream. Instead, she remained soundless. And motionless.

Seconds passed like hours. Pam strained to listen but heard nothing else. Eventually, she felt fairly sure whoever was there, if there really was someone there, had gone.

Mustering her courage, she moved to the edge of the bed. Half of her thoughts told her to get back under the quilt and stop acting so childish. The other half told her she wouldn't fall back to sleep until she assured herself that all the windows and the one door leading outside were secure.

Carefully, Pam started making her way down the hall. Maybe I'm still dreaming, she told herself. Perhaps her tired mind had made all this up. She probably didn't hear anything.

Now chilled with each step, her head swarmed with fear and uncertainty. Should she call Tom? Or 911? No. They'd think she was hallucinating. She was beginning to reach that conclusion herself, but it wouldn't do her any good to make it official. Maybe she should just try to scream and hope she woke up. Either that or it would scare the person away. If there really was a person.

At the end of the short hall, she peeked into the combination living room and kitchen. Her heart started to race before she had a chance to gasp. Light from the common hallway shone through a narrow opening, proving that the outer door was open.

Pam collapsed against the wall. Someone had been there! She had not imagined it! She closed her eyes. Okay, she told herself. Get a grip. Whoever it was is gone. Then she froze. A tall, shadowy figure appeared in the edges of the light from the open door. She screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Dr. Harrington?"

The overhead light switched on.

"Are you all right? I thought I heard something up here."

"Warren?" Seeing the property manager, Pam almost collapsed with relief. Her shoulders shook as she tried not to cry.

Obviously unsure what to do, the elderly man took a step forward and awkwardly patted her on the arm. “Its okay, Doc.”

Pam nodded just as they heard a car engine. She ran to the kitchen window. “Look!” she cried out.

A car, cloaked in the shadows of the trees, pulled out of the parking lot and onto the dark, country road.

“He ain’t got his lights on,” Warren observed, over her shoulder.

“No,” Pam whispered. “He doesn’t.” The car was barely visible. There was no hope of seeing the license plate.

“Do you know who it was?”

Pam shook her head. “I have no idea.” She backed away from the window and fell into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Something ain’t right,” Warren declared. “I’m gonna call the police.”

Pam didn’t hear him. Instead, her eyes fell upon her high school yearbook. It sat open on the table. Someone had cut out Megan’s picture.

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty

“What do you think?” Tom asked Bill Houser.

Pam observed them standing in her living room, watching another officer dust the doorknob and yearbook for fingerprints. She had just finished telling him about the night’s events.

“I think I’ll meet with Dr. Tedford first thing in the morning,” the deputy answered, his tone adamant. “If what he says is true, it puts the case in an entirely new light. I want to know why he didn’t come forward and say something earlier.”

Tom nodded. “It sure does. I want a restraining order on him, keeping him away from Pam. It’s just too much of a coincidence. First he tells Pam he thinks Collins was framed. Then, less than five hours later, someone comes in here and plants her missing yearbook on the table. There’s a connection somewhere. I can feel it.”

Mortified, Pam rose from the couch. “Guys, please. Don’t talk to him or get a restraining order yet! I’ve got to work with the man. Let me talk to him. Last night, at the dinner, I was too shocked to ask him any questions. But now, after that dream I had… Maybe he knows something more.”

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“On the phone, you said you may have remembered something else.”

Tom looked to Pam. She nodded to DeOreo. “I think so. It came in a dream. But it seemed so real.”

DeOreo nodded. “That’s not unusual. Tell me about it.”

Listening to Pam, Tom found it difficult to contain his frustration. The fact that someone actually broke into her Middleton apartment while she was sleeping made his blood boil. Who knew how far the guy would go next time? Strike that. Tom intended to make sure there was no next time. Between him, his parents, the Cartrights, and the officers Houser agreed to assign to her, Pam would rarely be alone.

Now two days later, they sat in a New York City hotel room. Rather than drive all the way back to Salem, they’d encouraged Roger DeOreo, a native New Yorker with family still there, to make the trip that far to see them.

Pam finished recounting her conversation with the psychiatrist, the dream, and the troubling episode that followed.

“The police are involved?” DeOreo asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Tom nodded. “And they’re taking the situation very seriously.”

DeOreo digested this, then looked to Pam. “In your dream, did you see the man’s face?”

She shook her head. “No. It was so dark. And the rain came down so hard. I could hardly see or hear anything.”

“What else can you remember?”

Tom turned to Pam. She tightened her fists and sat up straight. “I think I heard two voices.”

That floored him. She’d only mentioned one to him.

DeOreo held up a hand to silence his questions. “Male or female?”

“Both male. I’m almost certain. The dream keeps playing over and over in my head. Each time, I see or hear something else, but I can’t seem to put it all together.”

“Are you willing to be hypnotized again?”

Pam stood. Her eyes narrow, she planted her hands on her hips and looked directly at Tom. “Yes, I’ll be hypnotized again. But I want you to understand why.”

“Okay.” Tom couldn’t tell if she was upset or angry, but he’d definitely noticed a mood change during the drive into the city.

“It’s because I can’t stand feeling like a victim. I don’t want to be rescued. I don’t want this to be the focus of our relationship. But that’s what’s happening.” A tear trailed down her cheek. “And I hate it!”

Ah. Tom recounted all the things he loved about this woman. Other than her looks, which drove him wild, he admired her strength. Her determination and self reliance. He first noticed it years ago when both their rescue squads worked an accident scene together.

Soon after Pam joined the team in Hopewell, the counties banded together to help out at a nursing home fire. One glance over at Pam, working with a patient, impressed him far more than he’d expected. Even back then, at that young age, she portrayed a calm, professional manner. Yes, he confirmed. It was a good thing he didn’t hire her. He’d have been in jail within a week.

With that memory in mind, Tom stretched out his long legs and crossed them at his ankles. “I don’t think about it like that. But it probably feels that way to you because you’re so stubborn and accustomed to taking care of

everybody else. It's okay to need help now and then, Pam. Especially from me." Seeing that he got her attention, he winked. "Chew on that, cutie!"

Stifling a smile, she looked down her nose at him and took her seat.

"You did not cause the accident," DeOreo tossed in. "I'm convinced of that. And we are seeing progress. It's just taking longer than we'd hoped. Are you ready to try again?"

Pam let out a groan. "I thought you'd never ask."

DeOreo and Tom burst out laughing. In response, Pam sent them both an evil-eye glare. Laughing harder, Tom messed up her hair. "I love you so much!"

"Right." Playfully, she pushed him away and sat back in the chair. She closed her eyes. "Let's do it, Doc."

"Go back to the part where you're lying on the ground," DeOreo instructed. "Tell us what you see."

Tom watched the hypnotherapist help Pam reach the necessary level of consciousness. After a few moments, she squinted.

"Light. Bright light. It hurts my eyes. Can't see. Something slams. I think I hear a voice. No. Two voices." She stiffened.

"Do you recognize them?"

"Hard to hear. It's still raining. Just not as hard. I can't make out the words. I want to get away from them but I'm stuck. Pinned against the cold ground. They're coming closer. I can feel them. The ground is vibrating." She visibly recoiled.

"No pain, Pam," DeOreo reminded her. "It's just like you're watching television. Tell us what you see."

"Somebody is touching me. My face. I can't see him. There's a bright light shining behind him. He looks like a dark shadow."

"What's he doing now?" DeOreo asked.

"He's saying something to someone. I can't make out the words. I hear loud whispering. Almost arguing. "She did it!" I hear the first one say. "It's all her fault!"

Tom watched Pam's face contort in anguish. She raised her hands to her ears and began to sob. "Make him stop! Please!" she repeated over and over.

Alarmed, he looked to DeOreo.

The man held up his hand, as if to say, "Stay patient," but his eyes mirrored Tom's alarm.

Feeling helpless, Tom balled his fists. He wanted to see what she saw.

Slowly, she dropped her hands. The lines on her face faded.

“The calmer voice is back,” Pam said. “I think he’s telling the other man to leave. I hear car doors shut. Tires screech. I think somebody is driving away. It’s dark again.”

Tom watched DeOreo place his pen and pad on the table. “Where are you now?”

“I’m not sure if I lost consciousness. I think I’ve been lying there for a long time. It’s raining hard again, but I don’t care. It feels like I’m floating.”

The creases in DeOreo’s forehead deepened. Tom shot him a questioning look. The doctor shook his head. “Wait,” he whispered.

Then Pam exhaled. Her body began to relax. “I hear sirens. In the background. I see lights. Tom is there. I can hear his voice.”

“Do you feel safe now?”

She nodded.

Seeming satisfied, DeOreo brought her back.

“What’s up, Doc?” Tom asked. “I can see your wheels are turning.”

“You’re right.”

Tom thought he detected a hint of anger in the man’s voice. He watched DeOreo fold his hands on his desktop and peer directly at Pam.

“Someone messed with your head, Pam. Whether it was intentional, we won’t know, but it worked.”

Her eyes widened.

“Can you explain that?” Tom asked.

“Sure.” He looked to both of them, then back to Pam. “I believe we can now account for most of the guilt you’ve been harboring all these years.”

She furrowed her brows. “How?”

“I believe your dream was accurate.”

“Go on.” Pam urged.

“I also believe that in your fragile mental state right after the accident, your subconscious was very open to suggestions. Any comments or accusations, like ‘It’s your fault’ and ‘You did it,’ could leave a lasting impression. Especially when repeated over and over. When the first man blamed you in the harsh tone of voice you indicated, I suspect he convinced your subconscious that it was true.”

Pam sat very still.

“It’s often very difficult to alter that faulty type of thought process. Even now that you can recall the accident and you know you’re innocent, I’m sure you still harbor doubts. Don’t you?”

She squirmed, but remained silent.

The doctor nodded. “It’s understandable. And distressing. For you, and the person who blamed you. Clearly, your return to Middleton is causing him or her extreme distress. Breaking into your apartment was a huge risk.” He paused, his expression saying he was choosing his words carefully. “You need to be very careful. I don’t think this person can leave you alone now even if they wanted to.”

Agreeing, Tom released a frustrated breath. Instead of finding answers, the situation was getting even more complicated. And definitely more dangerous. Standing now, he declared, “We’re going to get to the bottom of this. Starting with Carl Tedford. Then we’re going to find the other guys.”

“But why did the man blame me? Did he know I’d been drinking? Is that what this is about?”

“You were not drunk, Pam. Or even impaired.”

Pam glared, her eyes showing confusion at Tom’s outburst and a tinge of anger. “How can you really be so sure?”

He looked at DeOreo, who gave him an expectant gaze, then back to Pam. Fine. It was time to tell her what he found out late last week.

“I tracked down your medical reports from the accident. I don’t know why they were missing from your file, but they were.”

Pam moved forward in the reclining chair, her attention focused on his every word. “Yes, they found traces of alcohol in your blood, but it was way below today’s legal limit, which is less than one drink for your body type. I didn’t tell you earlier because I knew you would still use it to keep blaming yourself. So don’t. Ryan crashed into you. End of story.”

Instantly, Tom regretted the impatience in his tone. That was class, Jarrod. Real class. He started to apologize, but something in Pam’s expression stopped him.

“What?”

To his amazement, she put her thumbs in her ears, wiggled her fingers and stuck out her tongue at him.

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-One

“Two men?” Eddie questioned. “At the accident? Since when?”

Perplexed, Tom tossed a pen down on his desk and paced the length of his office at the rescue station. “Since Friday night. One of the staff shrinks approached Pam at MMC’s dinner dance. Out of the blue, he floored her by seeking her out and telling her Ryan Collins wasn’t drinking the night of the accident.”

Eddie let out a troubling whistle and took a chair at the small, round table. “Well ain’t that just grand? We’ve got a medical report and a police report that say something different.”

“No kidding.”

“Go on,” Eddie urged, unwrapping a meatball sub. “What happened next?”

“That night, Pam had a bad dream. A very clear dream of the accident. Way beyond what she recalled during the first hypnosis session.”

Tom continued to fill him in on the details. “A few days later we got an emergency session with DeOreo, the hypnotist guy. He was able to sort out the events in the dream when he put Pam under.”

Eddie swallowed a mouthful and washed it down with a big gulp of soda. “Surprise, surprise.”

“You’re telling me.” Scowling, Tom reached for his coffee mug. “I knew there was more to the accident. Pam told me so after the first session. She thought she might have missed something. Or that something wasn’t quite right. Still, she was able to accept all of what she did recall. That’s what helped her to handle the situation and to move back here. But Tedford’s remark, followed by the new dream, the break-in, and discovering that there were two strangers at the accident scene…” Shaking his head, he frowned and scratched his head. “The situation is even more confusing than before.”

“And she has no idea who these guys are?”

Tom made a aggravated face. “No.”

“Okay. I’ve heard enough.” With that, Eddie rose to his full height and reached for the phone. “There’s too much missing here. Too many holes. Too many sudden revelations. And both you and I know there were more

than three photographs taken at the accident scene. Somebody's playing games."

Tom nodded. "I know. And the idea makes me sick. At this point, I'm open to any suggestions."

Eddie dialed a number. "And I know someone who may be able to offer a few."

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Pam parked her Volvo in her new parking space at the medical center and switched off the ignition. Glancing at her watch, she estimated the entire trip, to and from the bridal shop and mall, took just under five hours. Going seventy most of the way. She rolled her eyes. At least she'd bought most of what she needed. Shoes, garter, and lace thigh-highs. Even gifts for her maid of honor, Tom's best man, and the ushers.

Stepping out of the vehicle, she smiled and stretched. Hills and fields, dotted with silos and animals, surrounded her for miles. Then she gulped. Okay. So things weren't perfect. Someone was trying to scare her away and the accident didn't happen the way she'd originally thought. And Carl Tedford said that Ryan Collins wasn't drinking that night. But hey, who said life was meant to be perfect? She twisted her lips into a smirk. Hey, God. I hope you're getting all of this.

With that thought in mind, Pam closed the door and caught a glimpse of her wedding gown draped across the back seat. She thought of the wedding. All the arrangements had been made. They'd decided to hold the reception at Tom and Eddie's restaurant downtown. Tom's mom had handled the church, managing to convince the minister he could let Pam and Tom take a crash course in the marriage class instead of the long, drawn-out version. That meant they would be busy every night this week.

Katie also took care of the invitation list. Close to all of the one hundred guests had already responded. That left the music. Dan, Tom's cousin, volunteered there. His band played all the local places and had just cut their first CD. Last, Eddie volunteered to videotape and Rebecca offered to take photographs. What more could I want? Pam asked herself. Uttering a small prayer, she headed inside.

Greeting the staff, Pam noted the ED was quiet. Good. Though her shift didn't start for another few hours, she'd feel compelled to help out if they needed an extra hand. Now she had time to grab a sandwich from the cafeteria and make some phone calls.

“Dr. Harrington? I have a message for you.”

Pam turned and headed back to the nurses’ station. “Thanks.” Reading the pink slip, she frowned. The call was from Susan. Pam released a snarl. I forgot to add her to the not so perfect list, she thought to herself. What could that woman want?

Pam decided to go directly to the cafeteria. Dealing with her fiancé’s ex-wife required fortitude. Maybe she should reach Tom before she returned the call. If she decided to return the call. He might know what it was about.

Pondering Susan’s motives, Pam prepared to enter the elevator as the doors opened.

“Isn’t this convenient?” the cool redhead greeted. “You’re just the person I’ve been looking for.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-Two

“I plan to tell Tom I think he and I should try again.”

Pam felt like Susan stabbed her with a knife. It was fourteen years ago all over again. “So why tell me?” she asked.

They sat in a far corner of the cafeteria at an empty table. Neither of them bothered with the pretense of food. Anything they bought would go to waste.

As always, Susan was immaculately dressed. Seeming distracted, she inspected her manicured fingernails, then tapped them lightly on the table. “Because I thought you should know.” Then she added, “And because you are the one person who could interfere.”

“Again?” Pam quipped. She couldn’t help it. The word just spilled out.

Susan got the point. She narrowed her green eyes like a cat. “Thomas and I have two children to consider. Since you’ve never been married, or had children, I doubt you could understand, but as a mother, their mother, I can assure you they are hurt and confused. First their father wanted nothing to do with them, and now...now that you’re back, he suddenly wants to play Daddy of the Year.”

Pam ignored the digs. Instead she countered, “That’s not the way I heard it.”

Susan’s eyes turned to nasty slits. Watching her, Pam couldn’t help noticing that the woman’s mauve nail polish, lipstick and silk pantsuit all matched perfectly. She, on the other hand, wore baggy jeans, a sweatshirt and an old pair of sneakers.

The imposing figure settled back in her chair and squared her shoulders. “I’ll admit we’ve had our share of problems. All parents do. And now I can see how it has affected our sons. I want it to stop. I want to make things right for them, and I will do whatever is necessary to see that they do not suffer any more. If Thomas really cares about them, he’ll want the same.”

Before Pam could bite back her thoughts, they flew out of her mouth in words. “You don’t want him, Susan. You just don’t want me to have him. You also want that piece of real estate. What you don’t realize is that reconciling with Tom isn’t going to help you get it. And using your children as pawns to make him feel guilty is just disgusting.”

Indignant, Susan rose to her feet and swung her purse over her shoulder. “You think you’ve got it all figured out,” she challenged in a low menacing tone. “And maybe you do. But mark my words. I can make life miserable for you and him with a snap of my fingers.” Sneering, she snapped her thumb and middle finger. “Just like that!”

“I’m sure you can,” Pam replied, still riveting over her nerve to talk back to the woman. “And just think how awful that will be for your sons, the ones you claim to care so much about.”

Susan’s eyes flew open with rage but she held her tongue. Instead, she aimed daggers at Pam with her eyes, then tossed her carefully arranged hair and stormed out of the room. Her stiletto heels echoed down the corridor behind her.

Pam spent a minute composing herself, then headed for the doctor’s lounge. Climbing the two flights, she tried to make sense out of Susan’s unexpected visit. Did the woman really intend to reunite with Tom? What would he think? Did he already know? More importantly, what would he do? Sure, a mere minute ago Pam felt confident he would laugh at the suggestion. But was she really that certain? These were his children Susan was talking about.

Pam felt a gnawing sensation swirl in the pit of her stomach. It worked its way upward. He chose Susan once, her brain reminded. The image caused her to squeeze her eyes closed and lean on the stair rail. And with that choice went all her hopes and dreams. She’d thought they were lost forever, and she’d accepted the end result, burying it along with her best friend. Until a few weeks ago. Suddenly, they were resurrected. And gave her the freedom to hope. What would happen to them now? What would happen to her? Who would he choose this time?

Reaching her destination, Pam headed for the telephone. She started to dial Tom’s number, then stopped. What should she say? Something like, “Hi. It’s me. The woman you’re supposed to marry in a few months. I just wanted to let you know you’re ex-wife came by to see me today. For the sake of your sons, she thinks you two should give it another try. That means you can see them every day. You’ll be able to be the dad you always wanted to be. But I told her you weren’t interested.”

Pam’s head pounded with the unfairness of it all. This was what her aunt must have meant about things getting complicated. But why did it have to be? This was the second time she felt happiness just within her grasp.

And now, once again, it was slipping through her fingers. Why, God? her thoughts implored. Is it because I fell in love with a divorced man and divorce is a sin? Or is it punishment for drinking that night? How am I supposed to handle this? What am I supposed to do?

Hanging up the phone, Pam noticed a newspaper lying on one of the chairs. Instantly, the headline caught her eye. “Ex-spouses go to war over proposed land projects and children.”

Pam’s hand started to shake. Slowly, filled with dread, she picked up the paper and read the full article.

“Lawyers for both sides filed numerous motions over the past three days. Each raised scathing personal accusations against their clients’ ex-spouses in the midst of the battle over a proposed rehabilitation hospital vs. a housing development. The former Mrs. Thomas Jarrod went a step further today and petitioned the court to terminate Mr. Jarrod’s visitation rights with the couple’s two sons. She claims his fiancée is unfit and a dangerous influence on the children.”

Pam’s heart pounded and the back of her neck burned with indignation. Susan’s accusations were ludicrous. And unfounded. Yet still incredibly damaging. Farther down in the article, the reporter linked Pam to Megan’s and Ryan Collins’ deaths.

Great! Just what she needed. She threw down the paper and began to pace. In addition to everything else, here she was, starting a new job and a new life, and now her name appeared in yet another newspaper article. After all these years of pent-up guilt and emotion, she’d spent the past three weeks trying desperately to put the past behind her. And with some success. No, she didn’t like everything she’d recently learned about the accident. But she could deal with it. Could she deal with Susan?

Pam continued to pace. Even if Tom rejected Susan’s plans to reconcile, could that cause an even more negative impact on the boys? And what about this outrageous fight over the real estate? How long would that go on? And would it end there? Or would there be something else just as awful to deal with later? Considering the possibilities, she found herself asking, Is this really the kind of life I want?

Pam gasped. What a selfish question! The man she promised to love for the rest of her life needed her. At least, she thought he did. What kind of person would she be to even consider throwing in the towel? The idea was

unthinkable. Yet, she found herself repeating the question. If this mess didn’t get straightened out, what kind of life could she and Tom share?

Pulling at her hair, she walked back to the phone and called Tom’s office. Peggy, the dispatcher, answered.

“No, Pam. He’s out running some errands. If it’s an emergency, I can reach him on the radio.”

“No. Thanks.” That’s all she needed. More gossip. Next, she dialed his cell phone. After three rings, Tom’s voice mail clicked on. She left a message and hung up. She did the same thing on his home line. Where could he be?

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-Three

Pam took a quick glance at the clock on the wall. She still had over an hour before she needed to report for duty. Grabbing her keys, she headed for town. Fifteen minutes later, she found Tom's truck parked outside his lawyer's office down the street from the courthouse. Across the street, she saw Susan's BMW parked in front of her lawyer's office. This was too much. A couple of dumb, bloodthirsty sharks making money off other people's misery. How absurd!

Armed with the newspaper, Pam entered the brownstone office building. Tom found her within seconds of the receptionist announcing her arrival. After a quick kiss, he led her into an office and introduced her to three lawyers.

Shaking each reptile's hand, Pam mentally added the amount of billable hours Tom must be paying. She imagined Susan's team cost even more. But for what? her thoughts screamed.

"You saw the article."

Pam handed him the newspaper. "Is it true?"

Their eyes met and held. Then he said, "Most of it. I meant to tell you about it earlier. There just didn't seem to be a right time. And compared to our future plans, I don't find it all that enjoyable to talk about."

Pam kept her eyes on him but remained silent.

"We were just discussing what to do next. Will you stay and listen?"

"Susan met me at the hospital a little while ago," she blurted out. She didn't care who heard her. "She wants to reconcile with you."

Tom threw his arms up in indignation. "That's just crap." He turned to his lawyers. "Can you believe it?" Then he swung back to Pam, his face etched with concern. "You know that's not going to happen. Right?"

Pam just stood there. She wanted to say something but couldn't find the right words.

Tom reached for her arms. "Right? There's no way. I won't let her break us up again. Ever!"

So you say, Pam's thoughts challenged. She'd been down that road before.

"Please stay and listen. I need your input."

After a long moment, Pam relented. She looked at her watch. “I’ve got about thirty minutes.” She took a seat on the leather couch beneath the window. Minutes later, she dug her fingernails into her palms to keep from interrupting. When the lawyers finally concluded their conversation, they left her and Tom alone. He went to her and drew her upward into an embrace.

“I’m so sorry about all this mess. I’ll take care of it. I promise.”

Pam pulled back and looked into his face. Tension lines etched his forehead. His jaw clenched with anger.

“You look like you want to say something,” he whispered.

“I don’t think you want to hear it.”

His frown deepened. “Say it.”

Pam stepped away and crossed her arms to her chest. She leaned against the desk and kept her eyes on the floor. Suddenly, they had reached a crossroad. It frightened her. But certain things needed to be said. And resolved. Otherwise, they had no hope for a future together.

“I’m waiting.”

Pam studied the man she’d always loved. He stood there, his feet planted firmly on the floor, but with a frozen expression, as if he was holding his breath, anxious for her response.

“I think you should end this thing with Susan.”

“Sure,” he answered quickly, seeming relieved. “I agree. I’m doing everything I can think of. What do you suggest?”

Dear Lord, she prayed silently. Please help us. Here goes. “You could sell her the property she wants.”

Stunned, Tom stopped in his tracks. “Are you out of your mind? That’s the only leverage I have against her. I’ve given in to everything that woman wanted, and she still wants more.” He released a cruel laugh. “Do you honestly think she’ll go away if I just hand it over to her? Come on, Pam. You can’t be that naïve. She’s never going to go away. And she’s never going to be satisfied. She’s like a chronic illness. She keeps coming back, time after time!”

“I agree.” Pam insisted, trying to keep her voice calm. “But we’re never going to have a normal life if you can’t resolve this. Sell her the property. You can build a rehab center somewhere else.”

Tom pounded his fist on the wall. “If I thought it would end her garbage for good, I’d do it. But it won’t work. She’ll just want something else later.”

“And what about your sons?”

The same pained expression she’d seen in the past flashed over his face. “What about them?”

She struggled to keep her tone even. “Susan told me she realized the boys were getting caught in the middle of your problems. She wanted to put a stop to it. Reconciling seemed to make the most sense.”

Vehement, Tom shook his head. “Absolutely not. I already told you. She’s just using that to try to drive a wedge between you and me, and to make me feel guilty about the kids.”

Pam wanted to feel a sense of relief. Instead, only doom prevailed. Her head pounded. Her throat burned. Frantically, she forced herself to push aside the confusion and heartbreak swelling in her soul. She must remain objective. And detached. Like when assessing a patient’s medical condition. There was no room for emotion, fear, or second guessing. This was the rest of their lives they were talking about.

“Susan has a valid point, Tom.”

“Which is?” he challenged.

“Your battle with her is hurting your children. It’s all over the newspapers. People read this and then they talk about it. Kids overhear things. They don’t understand the context. They just see or hear the words.”

Tom stared at her. Then, seeming subdued, he took a seat on the couch. “I understand what you’re saying. Unfortunately, the simple truth is that my relationship with the boys has been crap from the beginning. Susan and I made rotten parents together. I let her take the lead role because it was easier than fighting. But it didn’t matter. We still found reasons to disagree.”

He turned away, but not before Pam saw the tears rimming his eyes. They ripped the holes in her heart even deeper.

Please God, Pam prayed. Please give me the right words. She swallowed, hoping to take the strain out of her voice.

“You could be right, Tom. Or wrong. This time could be different. Maybe it felt hopeless before, but now you’ve made contact again. Susan realizes this. I’m sure she also realizes that the boys are older now. Soon, they can make their own decisions. They’ll make their own assessments of their parents. Don’t you see? It’s got to end somewhere. Why not right here?”

One of the lawyers returned with a pile of documents. “Am I interrupting?”

Pam looked to Tom.

“These need your signature now if we’re going to file them in court today.”

“What are they?” Tom asked evenly.

“The libel and slander suit against Susan. And the request to attach all her assets.”

“I’d like to ask a question,” Pam interjected quietly.

“Sure,” the lawyer nodded.

“How long do you think it will take to resolve all this...mess?”

The lawyer scratched the top of his balding head. “Nothing in court happens fast. It will take at least a year.”

“Minimum?” she inquired.

Clearly uncomfortable, he loosened his tie.

“Like I told Tom, I’m certain that even if we win, Susan’s lawyers will file appeals.”

Pam looked to Tom. His expression told her he’d made up his mind.

“Thank you.” Slowly, she walked to the door. She didn’t want either man to see her tears.

“Pam!” Tom shouted. He stepped in front of her. “Where are you going?”

“The hospital,” she managed, avoiding his eyes. She got past him and through the door.

She heard his footsteps trailing her but she did not stop. He grabbed her arm just before she reached the street and swung her around to face him. “What are you doing?”

She found she still could not face him. Couldn’t he see? They couldn’t start their new life together with all this turmoil. It was a recipe for disaster.

“Pam! Look at me!”

“I can’t,” she cried.

He tried to pull her close but she resisted.

“Tell me what’s wrong!” he demanded.

She could hear the desperation in his voice. It tore at her soul. But better now, she tried to reason, than later. Clearing her throat of the tears, she found her voice.

“Susan needs to keep you in her life. If not as her husband, then as the boys’ father. And if that doesn’t work, she’ll come after you personally and professionally. Like she’s doing now. Trying to humiliate you in public.”

“Okay,” Tom replied.

“Don’t you see?” Reluctantly, she met his gaze. “One way or another, if you continue to fight her, she’s got you, Tom. She wins. Even if she loses.”

“And you think I should just walk away?”

“I know it sounds hard, but yes,” she answered. “And then each of you could sign a contract saying that this will be a final settlement of all matters involving real estate. So she can’t come back later.”

He dropped his hands to his sides. “I can’t. It won’t stop her.”

The stone cold glint in his eye pierced Pam’s heart. She felt like someone had just picked her up and slammed her against a stone wall. It took all the strength she could muster to remove her engagement ring and hold it out to him.

“No!” Tom shouted. His face turned red.

“We have no choice.”

“You can’t do this!”

“I don’t want to,” she sobbed. “But it’s not going to work. I can’t bear the thought of us being married and miserable. Please,” she implored. “Just take the ring!”

“I will not!”

“Then…” She could hardly get the words out. “I’ll…I’ll send it back to you.” With that, she turned and ran out of the building.

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-Four

“Triage to the waiting room, stat,” a voice projected over the intercom system. Pam heard the page while finishing a patient’s discharge papers. The door between the waiting room and ED kicked open. She saw a nurse come rushing through with a limp, swollen-faced child cradled in her arms. Two teary-eyed parents followed her in.

“I need a doctor!” She ran past Pam, taking the child into one of the critical patient rooms.

Pam followed. “What’s the story, Pat?” Quickly, she and the nurse undressed the small child to begin their assessment.

“We were at the park,” the child’s mother started. “She was playing in the grass. I heard her cry so I ran over. She was holding her arm. It started to turn red. That’s when I saw a bee stinger sticking out. I tried to get it out.” The woman began crying uncontrollably.

Her husband continued. “Ashley’s face and arms started blowing up. We got her in the car and came right here.”

“Has she ever been stung before?” Pam asked.

The mother nodded. “Once, but she was fine afterward.”

“Anaphylaxis,” Pam diagnosed aloud. She shot Pat a warning glance. To the mother, she explained, “Children who are allergic to bees do not experience a reaction until the second time they are stung.”

“Her respirations are poor,” the nurse reported.

Pam agreed. “We need to tube her. Get me the Benadryl and some Epi. And an IV.” Pam noted the child’s face turning a bluish shade. The reaction was causing her throat to constrict. She placed an oxygen mask over the child’s mouth and nose to help her breathe.

“Anaph… what? What does that mean?” the father questioned.

Pam heard him but did not respond. Anaphylaxis was a deadly form of the allergic reaction. She didn’t have much time. Working feverishly, she noted the nurse breaking out the intubation kit.

The examination room, quiet and empty minutes before, filled with a dozen staff members. Everyone had a job. Orders were shouted and complied with, keeping one goal in mind: to save this child.

“What’s that tube for?” the father demanded.

“Sir,” another nurse began. “You need to let the doctor and staff work.”

“Fine, but that’s my kid. I want to know what’s going on!”

Pam tuned out the man’s demands. Instead she focused on her job, going through the protocol in her mind. She injected the Benadryl and epinephrine into an IV to help the child’s body fight the toxic intrusions from the bee that now raced through her system. She then placed the intubation tube down the child’s small throat. That should help.

“Her blood pressure is dropping,” a nurse reported.

Pam glanced at the monitors. “Let’s repeat the Epi dose.” She tried to remain calm, but knew the child was not responding.

“What does that mean?” the mother cried out. She rushed toward the child.

Her husband joined her, demanding attention. “I want to know what’s going on! Why isn’t she getting better? Do something!”

“Sir, please calm down,” a nurse requested. “Your child is experiencing a severe allergic reaction. We’re doing everything we can to help.”

The child’s mother gasped. She broke into a flood of tears and ran out of the room.

“You better listen to me!” the father warned, getting in Pam’s face.

“Move, sir!” She pushed past him and continued working.

“You better save my kid or you and this hospital are going to be…”

“Need a hand, Pam?” As if on cue, Tom walked into the room.

She quickly glanced in his direction. “Where have you been?” her eyes asked, grateful for his intervention. Obviously, he’d been walking by and overheard the ruckus. Then she turned away. She had no right to expect anything from him on a personal level. He would have done the same for anyone standing in her shoes.

“Let’s go out in the waiting room,” she overheard him tell the man. There was something in his tone that made the suggestion non-negotiable.

Pam sighed with relief. At the same time, she felt for the child’s parents. Their grief ripped right through her. She blocked it out, keeping her attention on the child. The small face had now turned ashen, causing Pam’s fear to become a reality. Anaphylaxis had two phases. First, it closed the airway until the victim couldn’t breathe. Then it dilated all the blood vessels, causing the blood pressure to drop to dangerously low levels. Pam secured the airway with the tube but she still couldn’t get the child’s blood pressure back up.

“Try the Epi again.” Pam instructed, fighting to keep calm. “Someone hang me a dopamine drip.”

“I’ll get that!” Tom interjected, returning to the room. He helped a nurse set it up. “What’s the status?”

“Airway secure. Oxygen saturation is fair, but I can’t get her BP up. The heart rate is racing too fast.” Pam knew giving too much Epi could worsen the condition, but she had no alternative. She needed the drug’s blood pressure-increasing effects.

“Doctor!” the nurse exclaimed. “She’s in fibrillation!”

Working feverishly, Pam refused to give up. It was so hard to imagine how a simple bee sting could have such a terrible result. “Charge the paddles! Let’s defibrillate!” she directed. At the same time, she prayed. For the child, her family, and for herself. Please let me help her, God. Don’t take her.

The combination of low blood pressure and a rapid heart rate caused the child’s heart to stop beating. Instead, it just quivered like a Jell-O mold. The only way to get it started again was to shock it.

Pam applied the paddles to the small chest three times, in succession. It didn’t work. “Start CPR!” her voice cracked.

Everyone focused on the heart monitor, willing it to show a normal beat. Drugs, shocks, CPR. They repeated the routine over and over again.

The heart monitor went from a flurry of activity to a straight, flat line. Beads of perspiration soaked Pam’s head. She knew it was time. The nurses knew it was time. Tom knew it, too. “Does anybody have any ideas?”

Silence screamed through the four corners of the room. They had done everything they could. It just didn’t work.

“Stop CPR,” Pam relented, fighting to keep her voice steady. She looked at her watch. “Time of death… 11:45 a.m.”

For a moment, the room stilled. Then everyone switched into cleanup mode. Nurses and aides started bustling around picking up the mess they’d created. They unplugged IVs and shut off the heart monitor. Only an occasional whisper could be heard.

Pam had lost patients before. Many of them. That was the nature of emergency medicine. Not everyone could be saved. Still, she replayed the steps she’d taken in her mind over and over again.

Pam found textbook cases, like this one, the worst. Most medical procedures have a chronological list of steps. If the doctor follows those

steps, everything should work out fine. But it doesn't always happen that way. Sometimes, no matter what she did, it just didn't work.

She'd also learned early on that the end result left scars that lasted forever. While she repeatedly second-guessed herself, the patient's family mourned their loss. Eventually, in many cases, that mourning turned into blaming her.

"Do you want me to go with you?"

Pam knew what Tom was referring to. She had to break the news to the deceased child's parents. They would want to hear it from the doctor in charge. Tom's offer to share that horrible burden made her remember again why she loved him. And always would. It took everything in her being to turn him down.

Avoiding his eyes, she shook her head. "Thanks, but its okay." Quickly, she walked past him, determined not to let him see her tears. But inside, her heart cried out: "This is why people marry, you idiot! To share the bad, along with the good. To strengthen each other. To bask in the successes and provide a safe haven when life pulls the rug out from under you. Tom just offered that to you. Be thankful. And stop being so selfish. He needs that same understanding from you!"

Pam tuned out the voice and went to meet the child's parents. The conversation did not go well. The only thing she could offer them was prayer, which they were not ready to accept. Now numb and yet overflowing with anguish for them and herself, she sought the refuge of her new office.

Seated at her desk, only Pam's eyes moved. Occasionally she swallowed, to force down the lump in her throat. She sat with her hands in her lap, both her arms and her legs trembling slightly. Thank God she had her work. It would sustain her. It always did. Except now, after losing that little girl, her self-esteem wavered. She also found herself in the exact position she'd tried so desperately to avoid: here, in Middleton. Not Boston, Chicago, or some other large city where she could lose herself with a broken heart. She felt so exposed. Raw. Foolish.

She and Tom had spoken briefly, earlier that morning, before this latest emergency. They'd agreed to remain friends. Best friends. And intellectually, she wanted that. No matter what the circumstances, he held a part of her heart. And, she believed, she held a part of his. But at this very instant, every nerve in her body screamed in anguish. Without meaning to,

he’d touched her soul. He’d left his print upon her, and she would never be the same again.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-Five

“Are you heading over to MMC, Chief? We’ve got some reports they requested.”

Tom gave his second-in-command a dismissive shrug and climbed into his truck. “Nah. Get someone else to do it. I’ve got some stuff to take care of.”

The digital clock on the console told Tom thirty-seven hours had passed since he last saw Pam at the hospital. He knew her schedule. She was on duty again today and into tonight in the ED. If he went to the hospital, she’d be there. But he wasn’t ready to see her. Not yet. He put the truck into gear and sighed. Maybe never.

Tom took the first left out of town and headed toward the highway. Going where? He had no idea. His head hurt. His gut ached. Emotionally, his nerves were strung tighter than a bowstring ready to snap. It reminded him of fourteen years ago. When he learned Susan was pregnant. When Pam had the accident. When she left.

“Ha!” He released a humorless laugh and floored the accelerator. This was a million times worse!

An hour later, Tom found himself two counties over. Hunterdon County High School’s football team was Middleton’s biggest rival. It had been that way for decades. He commanded his memory to recall close scoring games, winning plays and victory parties. Anything to keep his thoughts away from Pam. When he reached the next county line, he pulled over to the side of the road and slowed to a stop. If he kept going, he’d soon cross over into Ohio. Not a bad state, he reasoned. Starting over in some place new sounded pretty good right about now. Then his frown deepened. Eventually, he’d have to turn around and get his life back in order.

Making a U-turn, images of Pam snuck into his thoughts. After all this time, she’d finally returned to his life. And now they were apart again! How awful was that? Could things get any worse?

For an instant, Tom squeezed his eyes shut to block out her smile, bright eyes, tears… The way she felt in his arms… Even if she was right. Even if he agreed to give in to Susan this time, the underlying problems still remained. Susan made it her life’s mission to ruin him. And she eagerly used their sons to accomplish that goal. She needed to be stopped. Now!

There was a time, not too long ago, when Tom thought he could handle his ex-wife's issues and still lead a semi-normal life. It was right about the time he saw Pam's resumé on Marlene Everett's desk. Yeah, he grimaced bitterly. In my wildest delusions. I can't handle her at all, and my life is more of a mess now than before. Why, Lord? Why am I so stupid? What do you want me to do? Am I still paying for my sins? When is it ever going to be enough?

His cell phone rang, momentarily diverting his attention. Oh great. Susan's telephone number glowed on the caller ID. He considered ignoring her, but then changed his mind. If she pissed him off, he could always hang up.

"Yeah?" he answered briskly.

"A.J.'s gone!" she cried.

"What? What do you mean, gone?" He could hear tears and panic in her voice. His own pulse quickened.

"I… I don't know," Susan stammered. "I went to pick him up from soccer practice a little while ago and no one's seen him. I've called all his friends. I've been driving up and down the neighborhood… Nothing. Mark said they saw each other right after school."

Tom checked the time. School ended three hours ago. Where would he go? And why? "Did you call the police?"

"Yes."

"All right. Meet me at the police station. I'm out at the county line so it will take me about a half hour to get there. Call if you hear anything else." Tom was about to disconnect the line when he thought of something else. "Where's Mark?"

"Right here. I'm taking him to the neighbor's house when we hang up."

"Okay. Please put him on the phone."

"Hi, Dad."

"What's up, Buddy," Tom said, trying to remain calm. Inside, he felt like an erupting volcano. "You okay?"

"Yeah, Dad."

It killed Tom that they had such a formal relationship. Getting this one to talk about anything was like pulling teeth. "How did school go today?"

"Fine."

"Something happened. Didn't it?"

Silence. “Come on, Mark. You’ve got to tell me. Why did your brother take off? What was he upset about?”

After a moment, Tom heard a sigh.

“I don’t know exactly,” the boy started. “But I think some kids teased him.”

“About?”

As Tom asked, he realized he already knew the answer. The newspaper articles. “It was about your mom and me. Wasn’t it?” Dear Lord. Please forgive us both. I am so sorry.

He clenched a fist, wanting to smash it into something. Why can’t I just get this right?

Holding back the sobs lodged in his throat, Tom tried to sound reassuring. “It’s going to be okay, Mark. I promise. Now, help your mom. Try to think where A.J. may have gone, and call me or her if you get any ideas.”

Uttering a short, continuous prayer for both his sons, Tom drove even faster. Intent on getting back to Middleton, he almost missed the latest call over the radio.

“Car 390 on the air for the 911.”

“390 is on, go ahead Dispatch.”

“390, handle the Middleton 911 on Marsh Road for struck pedestrian.”

“Roger. En route.”

A few minutes later, Tom heard, “390 is on the scene.”

“Roger, 390.”

Tom spent his entire adult life handling rescue calls. He knew the drill by heart. Though still driving way beyond the speed limit, he envisioned his medics doing their jobs. Soon, they would contact the hospital to let it know they were coming in. He liked to listen to these transmissions, which his staff called ‘patches.’ They enabled him to critique his staff based upon the reports they gave.

Tom dialed the medical center’s frequency on the truck radio. At the same time, he listened to the portable radio transmissions between Dispatch and the medics. He also prayed A.J. showed up before he reached the police department.

“390 to Dispatch. We’ll be transporting one party, priority one, ALS.”

Advanced life support, Tom noted, hearing the sirens in the background over the radio. The ambulance was en route with it patient to the medical

center.

“Roger 390,” Dispatch responded. “One party, ALS.”

“Dispatch, is Medic One on the air?”

“Affirmative, 390.”

Tom raised a questioning brow. What would they want with him? It sounded like a routine call.

“Go ahead, 390,” he cut in.

“Medic One, please call Dispatch on a private line.”

Tom’s subconscious understood the message before his brain and body reacted. Something had happened. Something very bad.

“Please God,” he prayed aloud, over and over again. “Please don’t let it be A.J.”

A wave of perspiration drenched his forehead and rolled down his back. He punched in the station’s number on his cell phone.

“Middletown Dispatch. Officer Woodworth speaking.”

“It’s Tom, Sarah. What’s wrong?”

There was a slight hesitancy before she spoke. Tom used the time to fit in another desperate prayer about A.J.

“It’s Susan Murphy. She’s the struck pedestrian.”

“What?” He heard her words but needed to make sure. He’d been so convinced it was A.J.

“It’s Susan. And it’s bad.”

Tom felt so grateful and relieved that he uttered another prayer and drove the truck into the breakdown lane. Then the news sunk in on a different level.

Susan? She was hurt? They may have their differences, but he didn’t mean her that type of ill will. His sons’ faces came to mind. How would they react? Then he remembered A.J. was still missing. He aimed the truck back toward the road and switched on the lights and sirens.

“I’m on my way, Sarah.”

Truths Unveiled

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Chapter Forty-Six

The ride seemed endless. Tom listened to 390 patch into the medical center and knew Susan suffered critical injuries. She'd been hit by a delivery truck and remained unconscious. The ambulance arrived about five minutes before he did. He raced through the automatic door, practically right into a nurse he knew. "Where is she?"

"Room 3."

Tom ran past, then slowed to a somewhat normal pace to stop himself from charging into the trauma room. It overflowed with medical staff members. He noted Susan's reflection in the mirrored lamp overhead. She lay still on the gurney. Splotches of dark crimson blood contrasted with her pale body.

Tom could only stand there. Instinct told him to demand answers. Experience told him to stay out of the way and let the team do their job.

"We couldn't get the tube in," he heard a paramedic report.

Unable to move, Tom watched Pam and another ED doctor try the same procedure. It didn't work. Frustrated, Pam threw the intubation tube to the ground. "You're right. There's too much damage."

Trying to remain calm, Tom studied the monitors. Susan was breathing. Just barely. At the same time, he prayed for her and A.J. Please help her and keep him safe, Lord. Please bring him home now.

"Get the respiratory tech up here. Stat!" Pam commanded.

"The place is hopping this afternoon," a nurse reported. "They're running slow."

As if reading his mind, Tom caught Pam glancing at him. For an instant, their eyes met and held. He could read her like a book. I'm worried, she told him silently. This isn't good. Aloud, she warned, "We can't wait!"

They both thought the same thing: Susan was fighting for her life. She couldn't breathe. Only an emergency tracheotomy could help her now.

A nurse approached him with a clipboard. "You're Susan's medical decision proxy. If you consent to treatment, including surgery, please sign here." She pointed to the last line on the page.

Tears blurring his vision, Tom grabbed the pen and scribbled his name. "Do it!"

Pam acknowledged him with a single nod.

“Betty, get me a scalpel. I’m going to trach her,” the other doctor directed. Pam quickly prepped Susan’s neck with Betadine. Tom knew the procedure. He also understood why Pam deferred it to the other doctor. Though he had no doubt she could put aside her personal opinions about Susan and give her the past care possible, this was the smarter approach.

Tom watched the doctor make a small incision in Susan’s throat and insert a tube. It would bypass the traumatized portion of her windpipe, letting her breathe.

Without warning, Tom felt a wave of nausea threaten to overwhelm him. Years of training and experience prepared him for almost any kind of emergency. But nothing prepared him for this. The team members gathered in a tight circle around the patient. He could hardly see what was happening.

“Here we go!” he heard the doctor say. “Give me the tube.”

Within seconds, everyone sighed with relief. They backed away from the table. Tom took the opportunity to move forward and watch Susan’s pale, ashen face return close to its normal color.

Pam looked at Tom.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She nodded once then said, “She needs the OR.”

After a few minutes, with tubes and wires secured, he watched Susan being rushed to the elevator.

“Dad?”

Tom turned to find both his sons, their faces stricken with fear, running into his arms.

Truths Unveiled

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Chapter Forty-Seven

Satisfied that Susan was in the best of hands, Pam brushed away a tear and fled to her office. Thankfully, it was empty.

Seeing Tom just now really rocked her. They'd spoken two nights before, but to no avail. To meet now, under these awful circumstances, made their situation seem even worse. She ached to run to him. To comfort him. At the same time, she needed to touch him. To feel his arms around her.

Last night, and today, without him, she'd kept it together. But just barely. She missed him terribly. Numbing her mind and her heart, she went about her business, forcing her thoughts away from everything except her job. And she succeeded. But only to a certain extent. Sure, she was efficient, but only in a detached sort of way. Not like before, when her work was her salvation; her means to escape the pain of her past and to ward off the loneliness.

Now, seeing Tom's reaction to Susan's condition crushed any hopes she may have had about getting back together with him. His stricken expression, those hooded eyes rimmed red with tears, and his tight, drawn mouth and clenched fists clearly portrayed his devotion for the woman. It also convinced Pam that she had been right to end their relationship.

And he should feel that way about Susan, she reasoned. They had been married at one time. They had children together. And they were still so tied together emotionally, even if it was mostly negative. But maybe that was to cover up the hurt they both felt. Maybe this tragedy could turn out to be a good thing for them. Though it killed Pam to acknowledge this, maybe it could help them put things in perspective. Susan would recover. Pam felt certain of that. And then maybe she and Tom could put aside their petty differences to give their marriage another try.

This possibility, though Pam knew it might be what God wanted, crushed her heart. She prayed that He would take away the jealousy she suddenly felt and help her to feel happy for them. But at the same time, she realized that she could barely control the imaginary wall of water threatening to break through the dam and knock her off her feet. Forcing herself to get a grip, she called the ED nurses' station.

“Hi,” she said abruptly. “This is Dr. Harrington. Is everything under control? Good. I’m going to take a half-hour break.” She’d been on her feet for more than eight hours. They would understand.

Next, Pam went into her private bathroom and turned on the shower. After stripping off her stained scrubs, she stepped into the steamy spray of hot water. Dear God, she practically screamed inside. Please wash away this pain. And help them to be a family again.

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“Pam?”

Startled, Pam poked her head out of the shower. Had someone called her name? Couldn’t she even take a shower in peace?

“Pam?” The voice repeated on the other side of the door. “It’s me.”

“Tom?” She held the curtain to her nude body. What did he want?

“Yes. I have to talk to you.”

“Now? Is Susan okay?” That was a dumb question. The woman was in the middle of major surgery. “I mean, has something happened?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, no. Just a sec.” Quickly, praying for God to help the surgeons and their patient, Pam rinsed the shampoo out of her hair, turned off the water and briskly dried off. Reaching for a robe she kept hooked on the back of the bathroom door, she called out, “Tell me what happened.”

“Can’t I see you? Are you still upset with me?”

Standing there, her hair dripping wet, wearing only a short robe around her body, she rolled her eyes at the absurdity of the situation.

“It’s not that. I don’t have any clean clothes in here. Please hand me a set of scrubs. They’re in the cabinet, against the wall.”

“Oh.”

Pam imagined him looking around for them.

“Well then, maybe what I have to say is better this way.”

“Huh?” Then she understood. Her stomach knotted so tight, she nearly keeled over from the pain. She wrapped her arms around herself and leaned against the wall, braced for his words.

Dear Lord, please help me to handle this, she prayed. Tom is going to confirm that he gave some deep thought to his relationship to Susan, and to their children. It caused him to decide that they should give their marriage another chance.

Pam squeezed her eyes closed.

“I wanted to tell you how sorry I am.”

Here it comes…

“You were so right. I’ve been handling this thing with Susan all wrong and it’s killing my sons.”

Devastated, Pam sunk to her knees. It’s happening. They’re getting back together.

She bit her lip to choke back the sobs of jealousy and humiliation.

“The boys are here at the hospital, scared to death for their mother. Though I can’t stand the woman, she is their mom and they love her. It’s tearing them apart to know that she’s in the operating room right now fighting for her life. Just like when she and I fight. I knew it couldn’t be good for them, but seeing their little faces just now, their eyes pleading for me to tell them she’ll be okay, forced me to see just how bad they’ve been hurting.”

Did Pam hear him right? Did he say he couldn’t stand the woman?

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-Eight

Before Pam could replay the conversation in her mind, Tom continued, “A.J. was missing this afternoon. We were scared sick, thinking that he ran away. I was out looking for him when I got the call about Susan. At first, I thought the call was about him. She was looking for him, too. According to a witness, she darted across the street to her car without checking the traffic. By the time the truck driver saw her, it was too late to stop.”

“Where was A.J.?” Pam asked, immediately troubled.

Tom let out a short chuckle. “The little pooper was with his youth group leader. He needed to talk about Susan and me and wanted advice about how to stop us from fighting all the time. When I asked him why he didn’t call me or his mom, he said he thought we’d be mad. And he didn’t think he would be so late. But Pam, as he apologized, he was bawling his eyes out. He and Mark are so petrified of losing Susan.”

“Thank you, God, for keeping that boy safe,” Pam whispered. “And please continue to help his mother right now.”

“Pam?”

“Yes?” she squeezed her eyes shut again, waiting for him to drop the bomb.

“Uh, do you think you could give me another chance?”

When she didn’t immediately answer, Tom started talking very quickly. “I mean, I know I’m not perfect. And that I can be stubborn and just plain dumb sometimes, but I think I learned my lesson. I promise to work on dealing with Susan and keeping the boys in mind. And I won’t do anything involving her or them without talking with you first. I want to make sure that everything I decide is good for us, too. And I’ll pay attention to your advice. I promise. You can even make it part of our wedding vows. Just please, please stay with me. I can’t guarantee it will always be easy, but I will always try to do my best. I just know we can have a wonderful life together.”

Afraid to speak, Pam wondered again if she’d understood him correctly. There she was, ready to be totally dumped forever, and Tom was telling her he wanted her back? That he’d do his best to stop fighting with Susan?

“Pam?”

Brushing at the new tears flowing down her cheeks, she pulled the robe tighter around her body and opened the door just enough for him to see her face as she nodded yes.

****

The sudden ring of the phone startled Tom awake.

“Yeah?” He shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

“You owe me, Buddy.”

Tom looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. The digital numbers glowed: 2:45 a.m. “Heck, Eddie. The cows aren’t even up yet. What’s your problem?”

“Where’s Pam?”

“Working. Why? What’s going on?”

“Meet me at the hospital.”

“Sure.”

“Now! You’ve both got to see something.”

Twenty minutes later, Tom recognized Eddie’s pickup truck parked in front of the medical center’s ED department. He pulled up next to it and lowered his window.

“Why the mystery?”

Eddie climbed into Tom’s passenger’s seat and handed him a large envelope. “You won’t believe what I’ve got. Take a look at these.”

Tom turned on the overhead light and opened the envelope. “Something’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure, but it certainly ain’t right.”

Curious, Tom removed an inch worth of eight-by-ten photographs. “What are these?” But after one glance, he shouted, “I knew it!” Adrenaline soared through his veins as he flipped through the pile.

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Where did you get them?” Tom demanded, still not quite believing what he held in his hands.

“In the fire department’s archives. Sorry it took so long. I just found them.”

Tom replaced the photos and turned off the truck engine. “Let’s go inside.”

Walking toward the emergency department entrance, Eddie filled him in. “Remember last week, when we were saying only three photos didn’t sound right for this type of case?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the other day, when you told me about Pam’s last hypnosis session, I got to thinking. There had to be more pictures. Number one, there were two deaths. That meant the coroner’s office had to come to the scene. Number two, the impact must have caused at least one of the vehicles to leak gas or oil.”

“And that means the fire department had to respond and do a hazardous material clean up,” Tom finished.

“Exactly. And we’re required to take photographs and document everything for the state transportation department and the environmental protection agencies. So tonight, after my shift, I started snooping around.”

Once inside, they slowed their pace. The ED was quiet. “Where’s Dr. Harrington?” Tom asked the nurse on duty.

“Check the third on-call room on the left. We just had a nasty couple of hours. She might be asleep.”

They found Pam wide awake, gluing latticework on a Victorian dollhouse. Seeing them in the doorway, her face turned beet red. “It’s kind of a community project. We all take turns working on it during our shifts. It helps us wind down.”

“So this is what you do when the rest of the world sleeps,” Eddie teased, surveying her work. “Not bad. Did you know about this, Thomas?”

Pam stood and met Tom’s kiss. “Hi. What are you doing here?”

Tom kept an arm around her shoulders. “Eddie found some more pictures.” He didn’t want to spring it on her like that, but he felt anxious and annoyed. Someone had deliberately removed these photos from the police department’s files. Why? He didn’t know. But he intended to find out.

“Last week, at your apartment, you said the photos I showed you meant nothing,” Tom continued.

Pale now, Pam sat down. She kept her back straight and nodded.

“Would you look at these with us?”

Her eyes widened, confirming what Tom believed. Though she felt better about her role in the accident, she still had questions. And so did Tom. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that the person who removed the photos from the file was in some way connected to the pranks pulled on Pam. In fact, he felt certain that the burglary in Pam’s Boston apartment was also related.

Someone didn’t want her returning to Middleton. Though the culprit had remained quiet this week, instinct told him he or she would strike again soon.

Tom pulled two chairs up to the table and reached for Pam’s hand. “After the first hypnosis session, you told me you recalled most of the accident but something was still missing.”

She nodded once.

“Then, after meeting Carl Tedford, you remembered more.”

Again, Pam nodded.

“But we’ve still got a ton of questions. Maybe some of the answers are right here in one of these photos.”

Pam’s eyes flickered from Tom to Eddie.

“I put the bad ones at the end,” Eddie said. “Promise.”

She released a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Good.” Tom found a small note pad near the telephone and removed a pen from his back pocket.

“Let’s start from the beginning,” He drew a diagram. “The reports say you drove your Ford Escort northbound on Spindle Hill Road at approximately midnight. The car contained two occupants. You and Megan. Weather conditions were dangerous and neither of you were wearing seatbelts. Am I right so far?”

“Uh-huh.”

Before continuing, Tom shot her a parental scowl.

“What?” Then, she rolled her eyes. “I wear my seatbelt now. All the time.”

Tom winked at her and continued. “Vehicle two, a station wagon, traveled southbound on Spindle Hill Road. It crossed over the center line on that narrow curve and hit you head on, causing your car to roll over and pushing you off the road and into a tree.” He left out the part about Pam being the sole survivor.

“Got it?” he asked Eddie.

“Yup.”

Quiet now, Tom placed one photo at a time on the table.

“I can’t tell where one car starts and the other ends,” Pam told them.

Eddie frowned at the almost unrecognizable metal twisted into a tree. “It’s a miracle you survived. Look at the intrusion into the front seats.”

Tom selected a clearer shot. “Take a look at this. You can see the inside of the car.”

“Check out all the glass,” Eddie said.

Tom met his best friend’s eye. He thought back to other accident scenes he’d been to.

“What are you thinking?” Pam asked. “What does the glass have to do with it?”

“Maybe nothing,” Eddie answered.

“But…”

“In most cases,” Tom began, “if a vehicle is hit head on, all the objects inside, including the occupants and the rear window glass, fly forward.”

Pam looked back at the pictures. “I was hit head on. It’s in the report.”

“It is,” Eddie agreed. “And your car was a hatchback. It should be filled with glass.”

Quickly, his pulse racing, Tom shuffled through the remaining photos, then pointed to one in particular. “Take a look here. There’s glass all over the road.” Then he took it away. It showed Pam and Megan still inside the car. Hoping to distract her, he looked to Eddie and pointed to the envelope he held. “Is the paramedic’s report there? If not, I’ve got a copy at home.”

Eddie flipped through several sheets of paper. “Here it is. What do you want to know?”

“What led the officer to think it was a head-on crash?”

Eddie frowned. “Beats me.” He went back to the photographs. “Hey. Look at this.” He pointed to a photo showing a shiny object. It was stuck in the Escort’s mangled back bumper. “What is that?”

Tom looked closer and shook his head. “Don’t know. It’s odd that it’s stuck in the back. I would think it should be in the front.”

“Let’s get the picture blown up.”

“Hold on here,” Pam interrupted. “Are you saying I was rearended? How could that be?”

“Don’t know yet, Honey.”

“But you think it’s a possibility?”

Tom looked to Eddie, then back to Pam. “Think about it. These new pictures don’t add up to the written investigation reports. And they were missing. Next, Carl Tedford says Ryan Collins wasn’t drunk, though he may have been high on pot. Then you recall hearing two voices at the scene that we can’t identify. And one of them specifically blames you. Right?”

Pam and Eddie glanced at each other and nodded.

Tom nodded, too. “Add all of that to someone seeming awfully bothered about you moving back down here. What do you think?”

Pam looked from Tom to Eddie, then at the photographs. “Did someone tamper with the investigation?”

“It certainly looks that way,” Tom said.

Eddie nodded. “Yeah, it sure does.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-Nine

Pam set the vanilla cake, shaped like a large dog bone, in the middle of the table and lit the candles.

“Look at that!” A.J. marveled to Rusty. He patted the retriever’s head and allowed him to lick his face. “De-licious! Can you see it?”

Mark hugged Delilah. “Don’t worry, Dilly, Your birthday’s coming soon. And Rusty will share his cake.”

Pam caught Tom’s wink as he took another photograph. Yes, they were having a birthday party for the dog. And she loved every minute of it. Her three guys had missed more than enough celebrations together.

Thankfully, Susan had responded well to the surgery and spent five days in the hospital. The boys split their time between Tom and Pam, his parents, and Jennifer, Susan’s sister. Now that Susan was home, she had agreed to the boys spending more time with Tom and his family on a regular basis.

When Tom and Pam took Rusty and Delilah to the vet for checkups the previous day, Rusty’s birth date was mentioned. Knowing the boys were coming for their first full weekend, Pam seized the opportunity. Now they all sat around the dining room table, complete with Scooby Doo plates, cups and hats, to pay tribute to the eldest four-legged member of the family.

“Rusty is thirty-six years old in dog life,” Mark calculated.

“Great multiplication skills there, Block Head.”

“Zit Face,” Mark responded, elbowing his older brother.

Pam eyed Tom and bit back a smile, watching A.J. return an elbow shot. “You handle it,” her look told him.

The carefree jibes and physical blows continued for the remainder of the short party. Afterward, cleaning up, Tom’s radio went off. The emergency band scanner followed.

“Medic One on the air for the 911.”

“Dad’s got to go,” Mark announced, standing up.

“I do. But I’ll be back as soon as I can. Okay?”

Accepting it well, both boys nodded. “You two have fun with Pam. Don’t give her a hard time.” He kissed them on the head, then looked to Pam.

She caught the disappointment in his eyes. But she also found the sense of purpose there that made him the man she loved. She gave him an

encouraging smile and held out his jacket and keys. “This is our life. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.” After a quick kiss, he left.

“Want to play Nintendo?”

“Sure do,” Pam replied, joining the kids in the living room.

“Can we listen to Dad on the scanner?”

Pam nodded. “Let’s turn it up.” They’d caught the fever. Just like their father. Just like her. If you weren’t on the rescue call itself, listening to it was the next best thing.

Turning up the volume, she pictured Tom en route to the scene. He mesmerized her. She’d felt that way since the first time she saw him, yelling plays at the high school football players. She hadn’t known him well then. She just knew she liked him.

That feeling persisted. Yes, after the accident, she suppressed it. Her mental well being made it a necessity. But the feelings came rushing back the instant she saw him at the factory explosion just a few weeks ago.

“Medic One is on,” Tom answered.

“That’s Dad!” A.J. cried out, grinning at her.

“You’re right.” She grinned back.

“Medic One, respond to Interstate 518 Northbound in the vicinity of Exit 54 for the motor vehicle accident. Several vehicles involved. Be advised, the fire department is also being dispatched to that location.”

“Roger, Dispatch. I’ll be en route.”

Pam loved hearing his voice. Then her thoughts switched to his touch. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks. Her stomach jumped. Stop that! she mentally scolded. There are children in the room.

“Medic One to dispatch.”

“Go ahead, Medic One.”

“I’m on the scene. I have multiple cars and two tractor trailers engulfed in flames. Get three helicopters to the scene and all available ambulances. I’ll be out of my vehicle on the portable.”

Pam and the boys listened to Dispatch dutifully reading back all of Tom’s instructions. They sat on the floor, eyeing the box, waiting for the next transmission.

It must have been this way before television was invented, she mused. The kids were engrossed. They sat at attention, determined to hear every word.

The scanner captured all channels: fire, ambulance and police. As an ED doctor, Pam got the full picture. The radio was alive with department jargon and units sending messages to their individual dispatchers. From what she could tell, the accident blocked the road for almost a quarter of a mile. Cars, trucks and tractor trailers all piled up on top of each other, some on fire, some containing possible fatalities. She looked to the boys. Should they be listening to this?

The doorbell rang. “Good,” Pam sighed. A diversion. It was Katie. Earlier in the day she’d called, asking to spend some time with the boys. Pam offered to bring them over to her house, but she declined. “Let’s use your beautiful house,” she said. “It’s stood empty for much too long.”

Pam counted her blessings again. Katie Jarrod had become a fast friend. From the beginning, she and Rebecca Cartwright had quickly and easily opened their arms and hearts to her. Furthermore, they both provided a sympathetic ear during that short breakup she and Tom went through. If she and Tom had remained apart, Pam knew their friendship could only stretch to a limited degree. Nevertheless, she valued the fact that they didn’t abandon her outright. They could have, she knew. And she would have understood. But they didn’t.

“Grandma!” the boys shouted, almost in unison. They rushed into her open arms.

“We gave Rusty a birthday party!” Mark told her. He held her hand and brought her over to the couch. “Do you want a piece of cake?”

Pam listened with one ear. The other focused on the scanner. She then unplugged it and reconnected it in the kitchen, out of the boys’ earshot.

“Medic One to Dispatch.” Tom’s voice sounded faint. She knew he was on his portable radio and probably working on a patient, but dispatch didn’t respond.

“Medic One to Dispatch,” Tom repeated. “I need additional fire and rescue units. One vehicle is on fire with occupants still inside. Request assistance. I’m at the northernmost end of the accident.”

No answer. Pam did some quick mental visualizing. Tom approached the scene from the north. He must have cut across the median. The rest of the units, which were just arriving, approached with traffic from the south.

“Medic One to Dispatch, did you copy? Request Assistance!”

Pam heard the unusual panic in his voice. It sped through her like a rocket. She grabbed the phone to dial 911. Dispatch would pick up and she

could tell them Tom needed help. Before she finished dialing, the scanner's fire frequency lit up.

"Engine Four to Command."

"Engine Four go ahead," the fire company's command center responded.

"We just heard an explosion from north of our location. We'll be heading that way to investigate."

"Roger, Engine Four."

Pam froze. A sinking, helpless feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Something terrible had happened. Quickly, she turned to the living room. The boys were busy, playing Go Fish with Katie. Good. She fixed her attention back to the scanner. Why was it so quiet? Where was Tom?

Seconds passed like hours. Pam could barely breathe. Finally, a voice came through.

"Engine Four to Command. We are arriving at the site of the explosion. It appears a car caught fire and exploded. We have two victims."

"Roger, Engine Four."

"Two victims?" Pam questioned. In general, no one thinks about rescue workers getting injured, but it happened. Tom was often placed in terribly dangerous situations. Immediately, her imagination took over and ran through the scene: Tom was helping a patient in a car and his radio failed. The car exploded and he was hit by the blast…

No matter how hard she tried, Pam could not wipe the vision from her mind. "No, God!" her thoughts screamed. Not now. Not after all we've been through. After we've finally found each other!

Unable to wait, she reached for her keys. She knew where they were. She had to get there.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Fifty

Pam headed for the door just as the red light on the scanner caught her eye. The ambulance channel! She darted back.

“Medic One to Dispatch.” It was Tom.

Pam’s breath caught. Thank you, she prayed.

“Medic One, go ahead.”

“How do you read me?”

“Loud and clear, Medic One.”

“Roger that. I must be having a problem with my portable radio. I need an ambulance at the far north of the accident. I have two patients with minor injuries. They need an ED evaluation.”

“Roger, Medic One.”

Filled with relief, Pam could not listen any more. She made it to the bathroom and closed the door. Leaning against it, she counted her blessings.

****

“Hey, where’s Pam?”

Pam recognized A.J.’s voice. Checking her face in the mirror, she blew her nose and ran a brush through her hair. Opening the bathroom door, she nearly fell over Rusty. Delilah blocked the rest of the doorway.

“Goodness,” she exclaimed. “I didn’t realize I was missed.”

She knew the dogs were going through a bit of adjustment with the boys here. “Don’t worry,” she told them. She gave each dog a pat on the head. “We still love you. You’ll get used to it.”

“Come here, Pam,” A.J. called. “Quick. I want to show you something on TV.”

“Be right there.” She went to the kitchen sink and filled a glass with water. “Katie, can I get you a drink or a snack?”

“No, dear,” the woman responded. She and Mark were busy putting together a model airplane at the coffee table.

Making her way into the living room, Pam saw that A.J. was watching a ski competition. She plopped down next to him on the couch.

“Hey, kiddo. What’s up?”

A.J. stood and looked around. Seeming satisfied, he returned to the couch and whispered, “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t want to seem like a pain.”

“Ask away,” she assured him.

He pointed to the television. “Can you do that?”

Pam followed his hand. On the screen, she saw two legless skiers race down the mountain. Hm. He had questions. Well, they were bound to come up eventually. “Yes,” she nodded. “I can.”

A.J. crunched his forehead the same way she’d seen Tom do. “My mom says you got hurt in a car accident. One of your legs got crushed. Part of it’s fake.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Was it real bad?” he asked softly.

Seriously, Pam nodded. “It was.” His questions intrigued her. Kids are so wonderful. And they’re so much smarter than adults give them credit for. Clearly, A.J. had been contemplating how to talk to her about this. The television program gave him a perfect opportunity to bring it up. “Do you want me to tell you what happened?”

“Mom says it was a real rainy night. You and another car hit each other and ended up in the woods.”

Well, thank you, Susan, Pam said silently. “Your mom is right. That’s about the gist of what happened.”

Pam noted the child focusing on her left leg. The “fake” one.

“Can I see it?”

Pam didn’t mind. But she wondered what Susan would think. Fortunately, she was wearing jeans. “Tell you what. The next time I wear a skirt, I’ll show you the whole thing and how I can bend at the knee. For now,” she took off her sneaker and sock. “You can take a look at this.”

A.J. studied the lifelike prosthetic foot and ankle. “It’s like a doll’s.”

She laughed. “You’re right. A good friend of mine back in Boston makes them.”

“Cool,” he exclaimed, checking it out from all angles. “It doesn’t look fake unless I look close up. How does it work?”

As simply as she could, Pam explained. “My thigh is attached to a pouch, a small bag-like contraption. The pouch is attached to a metal rod that goes down to the foot. It’s got a bendable part at the knee and the ankle.” She pointed to both areas of her leg. “All of it is covered with this doll-like plastic material that you can see here.”

A.J. looked over to his brother and Katie, then back to Pam. Moving closer, he whispered, “Can I touch it?”

Pam smiled. “Of course. Try to tickle my toes.”

Tentative, he wiggled his fingers, then felt the soft material.

“It won’t bite,” Pam whispered.

Gaining more courage, he touched it harder. Then tapped lightly. “Can you feel this?”

“Afraid not.”

He tried another spot, this time harder. “Here?”

She shook her head.

Thoroughly impressed, his wide blue eyes filled with awe. “That’s great! It means that if you stub your toe, it won’t hurt.”

“Imagine that!” she replied, wanting so much to wrap him in a bear hug. But that could wait. She didn’t want to force herself on him. In the meantime, she marveled at how wonderful he and his brother were. Spending time with them gave her a glimpse of a whole other part of life she hadn’t even known was missing.

She noticed he grew quiet. Then he said, “So you went away?”

“To Boston. That’s where I lived before we moved here. I stayed in the hospital for a long time. But I got better, and here I am.”

“And you knew Dad back then.”

Here we go. “I did.”

“But he married Mom.”

Pam nodded. “Yes, he did.” As she spoke, she wondered how much he knew about the situation.

“They fight a lot when they are together,” he told her. “It’s better this way.”

“I’m glad you’re happier.”

“Yeah. And now you’re going to be our step-mother.” He made it sound like a confirmation.

“Actually,” she replied, leaning over to tickle him, “Some kids use the term ‘step-monster.’ “

The boy’s eyes shot to hers. She winked. After digesting that for a moment, his mouth broke out into a wide grin. “Cool.” He stood and reached for her hand. “Let’s see if you can beat me in Nintendo.”

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Fifty-One

“This is unbelievable!” Pam groaned, disgusted that her Volvo would not start. She threw the keys onto the passenger seat. “You’re only six months old!” Drained and edgy from a busy twelve hour shift, she collapsed back against the seat and stared out at the pouring rain. It hadn’t stopped for two days. The parking lot was one huge puddle. Of course, she’d forgotten an umbrella. Actually, she’d left it somewhere. Or did it blow apart in Boston’s last storm?

Leaning against the headrest, Pam closed her tired eyes and rubbed her throbbing temples. After counting to sixty, she stuck the key back into the ignition. I’ll try one more time, she told herself.

At first, after a series of churns, the engine caught. “Hey! Good. Keep it up,” Pam urged out loud. Then it died. Quickly, she tried again. “No! Not the clicking sound!” She sighed. That was the one that told you the vehicle was definitely dead. “Ugh!” Grabbing her purse, she braced herself for the cold rain and stormed back into the ED.

“Back so soon? I thought you were done for the night.”

“So did I,” Pam told Marcia, one of the veteran RNs at the nurse’s station. “Car trouble.”

“I thought Volvos were supposed to be maintenance free.”

“Me too. Who should I call for a tow?”

Marcia handed her the phone. “I don’t know. It’s after midnight. Whoever it is will take forever. Want me to call Tom?”

Pam shook her head. “No. He’s been on call. At least one of us should get some sleep.”

“How are you ladies this fine evening?”

Pam watched a huge smile form on Marcia’s face. She turned to find Bill Houser walking toward them. He wore a yellow rain slicker, dotted with rain drops, and carried a clipboard wrapped in plastic.

“Long time, no see,” Pam greeted. Actually, since she still received police protection, she saw him several times a day and night since the break-in at her new apartment. It made her wonder how much longer such protection would continue. Since then, everything had remained quiet. No more newspaper articles, calls or break-ins.

Though Pam knew it wasn’t realistic, she wanted to think that the perpetrator had decided to leave her alone. Maybe he or she realized she

didn’t mean any harm. Or that she was sincerely sorry for what happened. Or maybe he or she had decided to direct their attention elsewhere when it became clear Pam intended to stay.

“You’re here late, Bill,” the nurse flirted. “How can I help you?”

“Just bringing in one of the local frequent fliers.”

Pam shot him a questioning glance.

“You know. One of our old-time geezers. They drink themselves into a stupor, go around town making their presence known, then we go pick them up. Since they’re not all that healthy, and we don’t know how much they drank, we bring ‘em in here to get checked out before putting them behind bars to sleep it off.”

“It must get old,” Marcia sympathized.

“Sure does. But hey, it’s part of the job.” Then he turned to Pam. “Don’t you look happy?”

Marcia let out a giggle. “Oh, she’s thrilled. She just finished a busy shift and her car won’t start.”

“Any idea who I should call?” Pam asked him.

“Nobody.” Houser winked. “Just wait here.” He reached for his radio. Grateful, Pam listened to him contact the town garage and arrange a tow.

“You’re all set,” he said. “They’ll bring it directly to the dealer over on Route 30. You can probably get a loaner car in the morning.”

Pam gave him an appreciative smile. At the same time, she stifled a yawn. “Thanks so much. I think I’m going to catch a few hours in one of the on-call rooms. I’ve got to be back here in twelve hours anyway.”

“Why don’t I give you a ride home?”

“Oh. No. Thanks for the offer but I don’t want you to go out of your way.” She blocked out the tempting thought of taking a shower and climbing into her own bed.

Marcia giggled again. “She’s not used to our small town hospitality yet.”

“Looks that way,” Houser agreed. “Come on,” he urged. “Get your stuff.”

Seeing Marcia nod in agreement, Pam relented. “That would be great.”

“The cruiser’s parked around back.”

****

Tom woke to the sound of a fire engine pulling into the parking lot. He’d been snoozing in his desk chair, subconsciously waiting for the next

rescue call.

“Hey! Get up!” Eddie bellowed in the doorway. He was dressed in full firefighting gear. “We’re onto something here.” He handed Tom a large envelope. “I gotta go, but take a look at this and call me later.”

Tom removed the blown-up photograph of Pam’s Escort after the accident. “This makes no sense!” he complained. An oval, metal emblem, approximately two or less inches in diameter, stuck into the rear bumper. “Where’d that come from? It was supposed to be a head-on collision!”

Now studying the picture closer, more questions filled his head. The emblem was from a Ford. But, unless he was mistaken, not just any Ford. He checked his watch and dialed Eddie’s cell phone.

“Did you catch it?”

“Yeah,” Tom answered. “And no. That emblem is from a Crown Victoria. The Police Interceptor model. What the heck happened? Did a cop cruiser crash into her? And if so, when? There’s no report of police involvement at the scene.”

“Next question.”

“Yeah?”

“Why were this photograph and the others taken out of the police department’s file?”

For what felt like the millionth time, Tom searched his memory for the events that night. Arriving at the scene, he could hear the fire engine’s sirens right behind him. Two police cruisers were already on site. “I keep seeing Murphy’s face.”

“Me too,” Eddie replied. “It’s not hard to figure out why Susan is such a kook. The apple surely didn’t fall far from the tree in that family.”

“Yeah, but why tamper with the evidence? Was he involved in some way? Is he one of the men Pam recalled?”

Eddie cleared his throat. “Or was Susan somehow involved? It’s no secret, Tom. She hated Pam.”

Tom felt his skin start to crawl. She still does. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat. “You think she tried to run Pam off the road that night? In a cop car?”

“Don’t know, man. But there she was, two months pregnant, and the father of the baby was in love with someone else. Desperate situations sometimes call for drastic solutions.”

“Or her father did it,” Tom whispered. He remembered George Murphy storming into the living room that night. No wonder he eventually died from a heart attack. Red-faced, a dark blue vein protruding on his forehead, he narrowed his dark eyes and practically spit at Tom. His fists, clenched in rage at his sides, looked ready to strike at any second. The guy considered himself the patriarch of the town. No way would he let his eldest daughter be disgraced.

“But I’d already agreed to marry her,” Tom exclaimed.

“Maybe they just wanted some extra insurance.”

Tom’s stomach rolled. Pam’s accident was one thing. Discovering now, fourteen years later, that it might have been deliberate was almost too much. An image of Pam appeared in his mind. How would she handle this? All this time, she’d been blaming herself. If Tom was right, and they’d found out sooner, how different would their lives have been?

“Did you let Houser know about this?”

“Not sure,” Eddie answered. “He was out on a call when I stopped by the precinct to talk to him. I left him a copy of the missing photos and a note on his desk.”

“I’m going over there now. If this emblem came from a Middleton cruiser, there should be a maintenance record somewhere.”

Eddie agreed. “Let me know what you find out.”

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Fifty-Two

Wet from the heavy rain, Tom entered the police department. He looked to the desk sergeant's chair. It was empty. He's probably in the back, Tom deduced. Taking a snooze. It was after midnight and Middleton wasn't exactly Philadelphia.

"Hey, Tom. Be with you in a sec."

Tom turned and found the short, heavyset sergeant, Max Wilkens, carrying a box of donuts and a coffeemaker into the room.

"Let me plug in this machine," he said, setting it up. When he finished, he wiped his hands on a towel he'd thrown over his shoulder. "There. That's done. So what brings you over here at this hour?"

How do you ask about a fourteen-year-old maintenance record without raising some suspicions? Tom wondered. Especially at this time of night. But he knew of no other way to get the answers he needed. He just hoped he could keep his patience in check when he spoke.

"Want one?" Wilkens asked. He helped himself to two crème puffs. "My wife made 'em fresh over at the bakery. Just about an hour ago."

Tom shook his head. "No, but thanks. They look great."

"Sure?" Max held out the box. "She makes twelve different kinds. These are my favorite." He took a bite. "Yup, I always said…"

Struggling to remain calm, Tom gripped the insides of his jacket pockets. Shut up about the donuts! he wanted to shout. Instead, he blurted out, "Can you look up something for me?"

"Oh. Sure. Sorry, Tom." Quick to be helpful, Wilkens placed the half-eaten puff on a paper plate and wiped his hands on the towel. "What do you need?"

For you to wipe that powdered sugar off your face, Tom's thoughts answered. With great self-control, he said, "Ah, a maintenance record. I think one of your cruisers was involved in an accident on June 25, 1994, but I don't have a copy of the report."

The officer scratched the top of his head, his expression curious. "Sure. What's up?"

"No big deal. Just checking some paperwork. I wanted to get some dates straight."

Wilkens gave him a blank look.

Oh, brother. Trying not to lie too much, Tom said, “At the last town committee meeting, the county auditors asked for a report about all vehicles we keep in service. Like a dummy, I offered to help.” To himself, he said, Dear Lord, please forgive me. It’s not a total lie. I do need to file a similar type of report. It just doesn’t include the police department. Sorry! To make it right I promise that I’ll offer to do the police records, too. Okay?

The sergeant continued to stare.

“I know how busy it can get in here,” Tom added. “And I just finished my shift. When I drove by, I noticed it looked slow, so I thought I’d stop in. I didn’t want to bother you guys with something this small when you’re in the middle of more important things during the day.”

“Well, our Crown Victorias are top of the line,” Wilkens assured him.

Vigorously, Tom nodded. “Of course. They have a great rating.”

Finally, Wilkens tapped something on the computer’s keyboard. A few seconds later, he let out a disappointed sigh.

“What’s wrong?”

“Those records are kept in the basement. The computer only goes back to 2000.” The guy stood and stretched. “It might take me a while.”

“I can wait,” Tom told him. It was clear Wilkens wasn’t thrilled about making the trip, but, hey, too bad. He needed those records. Fast. “Do you want me to help you look?”

Wilkens hesitated, considering the idea. Then shook his head. “Nah. I’ll be right back.”

Tom’s gut continued to warn him that something was wrong. Very wrong. None of this made any sense. Yet, if his hunch was right, what would he do about it? He might still detest his ex-wife, but their children loved her. If she had anything to do with the accident…Tom forced the ugly thought from his mind and prayed he was wrong. There’s got to be some other explanation.

Ten full minutes passed. First, he roamed the hallways. Then he sat down in one of the hard wooden chairs. A second later, he sprang to his feet. His nerves raw once again, he headed down the hall. This time, he stopped and tried concentrating on the pictures hung on the walls. Anything to divert his thoughts.

They included photographs of officers who had received commendations over the years, retirement parties, and department softball teams from decades ago through to the present. Tom recognized many of

the faces. Then his eyes fell on an old lineup of all the officers in their dress blues. They were at a formal annual awards dinner. Tom scanned the faces. He almost chuckled. How young they looked back then.

“There’s nothing on that date you gave me,” Wilkens called out, emerging from the basement. In between huffs and puffs, he added, “But I did find something about a cruiser involved in an accident later in that week. Some jerk did a hit-and-run into the front of a parked Crown Victoria. We never ID’d the perp.”

Listening, Tom caught sight of Bill Houser’s face in one of the photographs on the wall. The guy had hardly aged at all. Tom reached out to take the folder Wilkens held, then stopped. Something about Houser’s face drew him back to the photograph. What was that on the guy’s forehead? It looked like a bandage.

Tom’s heart started to pound. At the same time, his blood raced icy hot through his veins. He looked down at the bronze plate affixed to the picture frame. The date, June 28, 1994, shouted back at him. Three days after Pam’s accident!

“Looks like the officer involved was…”

“Bill Houser,” Tom finished.

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“Thanks,” he called out, already halfway to the door. Where’s Pam? his thoughts demanded. He grabbed his cell phone and dialed the hospital.

Truths Unveiled

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Fifty-Three

“Hi Tom. It’s Marcia. What do you need?”

“Is Pam around?”

“She left about fifteen minutes ago.”

Tom checked his watch. “Thanks, Marcia.” He started to close the phone when he heard the nurse ask, “Did she get you on the phone?”

“No. Why?” His ears rang with premonition. “What happened?”

“No big deal. Her car died.”

“What? Why didn’t she call me?”

“She knew you were on-call. But it turned out fine. Deputy Houser stopped by to chat. He gave her a lift home.”

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“I really appreciate this, Bill.”

“Glad I could help,” the deputy chief told Pam, driving out of the parking lot. I just need to make one stop on the way to your place. Why don’t you settle back and catch a few winks.”

Grateful for Houser’s assistance, Pam took him up on the offer and sank down into the passenger seat. The drone of the engine added to her drowsiness. She stared out the window, catching glimpses of landmarks she’d grown accustomed to passing each day on her way to the medical center.

To her right stood a pharmacy. Next came a grocery store and a popular coffee shop. When the cruiser approached the veterinarian’s office, she couldn’t help a smile. The sign contained a grinning mouse with a bandage on its finger, sitting on an elephant’s head. The elephant wore a sling on its front foot. Underneath, the sign read, “No animal is too big or too small for us.”

Closing her eyes, Pam thought of Tom. Thanksgiving was next week. Her parents planned to arrive on Tuesday to meet Tom’s family and help Katie prepare Thursday’s feast. They would stay through the weekend and confirm wedding plans.

How different this year would be compared to others, she thought, feeling extremely grateful.

“Ouch!” Pam screeched, bolting upright. A sharp stab, followed by a fiery burn, raced up and down her right leg. Where was she? Oh. With Bill

Houser. He was taking her home. Why weren't they moving? A flash of lightning revealed Houser fiddling with a hypodermic needle.

"What are you doing!" she tried to shout. But no words formed. It felt like she was moving in slow motion.

"You know it's all your fault," Houser accused, in a conversational tone. "I told you so at the time. If you'd kept him happy, he would have stayed away from Susan. And then she would have married me."

Another flash showed his features, twisted and tortured with desperation.

"You shouldn't have come back here. I tried to warn you."

Pam heard his words but she couldn't react. Her panicked reaction only served to help the drug he'd injected soar through her veins and paralyze her system. She caught another flash of light. He stared at her, deadly and determined. Then everything faded to black.

Truths Unveiled

Unlocking her hotel door, Pam relived the past few hours.

With everything else being equal, Tom Jarrod could tip the scales either way. On one hand, if she moved back here, and the past caught up with her, she could lose everything. On the other, if she just left and didn't return, she could be giving up the best thing that ever happened to her.

For the most part, Pam never gave much consideration to a social life. Sure, in recent years there hadn't been much free time. But now she realized that had been her excuse. More accurately, she didn't believe she deserved a serious relationship. Yet, in these past twenty-four hours, Tom changed that.

Getting undressed, Pam wondered, Can it work, God? Is Aunt Carolyn right? Is this why you sent me here? So I could learn to forgive myself, and for Tom and me to start over?

The exuberance Pam began experiencing last night while with Tom doubled its strength. Smiling and feeling like a giddy teenage, she found the mystery novel she'd started reading on the plane. A long hot soak in the tub sounded great. Heading toward the bathroom, she noticed the bathroom light, glowing under the semi-closed door. No big deal. Maybe the maid forgot to turn it off when she cleaned the room. Armed with the book and a nightshirt, she opened the door. Then froze in terror.

Taped to the large mirror above the sink, Pam saw what appeared to be the original newspaper article and photograph. There was no mistaking the

headline. She recognized it before her brain registered the words: TWO TEENS DEAD IN FATAL CRASH! ONE DRIVER SURVIVED!

Underneath the article, someone had written in red, YOU KILLED THEM! LEAVE HERE NOW OR FACE THE CONSEQUENCES!

Truths Unveiled

Chapter One

“I’ve got to be out of my mind to come back here,” Pamela Harrington muttered. She turned the rented Explorer into a service station just outside Middleton’s city limits. A quick peek at her watch told her she’d been driving nonstop for close to three hours.

After parking the truck alongside a gas pump, she switched off the ignition and released a deep breath. Chicago General was a top-notch, metropolitan hospital. And they offered her a fantastic job as an emergency department physician. So why was she here, out in the middle of rural Pennsylvania?

“Fill ‘er up, ma’am?”

Startled by the interruption, Pam jerked her head toward the open window. Smiling, a young, red-headed attendant waited for her response.

“Sure. That will be fine.” She stepped outside to stretch her cramped muscles.

“You that doctor who used to live around here?” he asked, placing the gas nozzle in the tank.

Pam’s over-anxious nerves shot to a new high. She held up a hand to shield her eyes from the sun’s bright rays, burning low in the late afternoon sky. She wanted to make this trip anonymously. Clearly, that wasn’t going to happen. She gave him an inquisitive stare. “What makes you ask?”

Grinning, he pointed his chin toward the inside of the truck as he washed the windshield. “Simple deduction. Your hospital ID is laying there on the seat, the back bumper sticker says you rented this vehicle at the airport and you meet the physical description.”

“I’m impressed,” Pam replied, removing a fifty-dollar bill from her pants pocket. “Care to tell me who’s interested in my arrival?”

“Sure,” he shrugged. He replaced the nozzle and gas cap, then took a pen from his back pocket and wrote out a receipt. Handing it to her, he said, “My cousin. He paid me ten bucks to call him when you got this far.” Then

he flashed a mischievous grin. “Want to make a counter offer so you could surprise him yourself?”

Pam’s eyes and smile widened simultaneously. She held up the bill. “Sorry. This goes toward the gas. What’s your name, anyway?”

He touched the rim of his baseball cap. “T.J. Jr., ma’am. At your service.”

Studying the attendant’s features, Pam felt a mixture of fire and ice soar up her spine like nasty bee stings and settle at the base of her neck. “As in Thomas Jarrod, Jr.?”

He sent her a wink. “That’s my cousin. I’m Timmy Jarrod, Jr. So what do you say? Want to reconsider my offer?”

Before she could answer, a deafening roar, like a crash of thunder, rumbled nearby. T.J.’s bewildered eyes locked onto hers. The ground beneath their feet started to shake. It lasted several seconds. The shrill of a siren immediately followed.

T.J. darted toward the building. “That’s the fire signal!”

Instantly alarmed, Pam followed him into the tiny convenience store portion of the gas station. Once inside, she heard a calm, steady voice giving instructions over a scanner.

“Signal Ten. Companies One, Three and Four. Explosion at the Power Master Tool Factory, 43 Sumner Avenue. Multiple injuries reported. All Middleton companies responding. Be advised, Middleton Regional Rescue is also being dispatched.”

“That’s me!” T.J. grabbed the portable radio and a strobe light. “This is Fire Fighter 132. I’ll be responding to the scene.” He motioned for Pam to follow him outside, then locked the station door. “Hey, your truck’s better than my old pickup. Can I drive?” He ran toward the vehicle, then stopped and looked at her. “You are that doctor, right?”

Pam gave him a quick nod. “That’s me.” She tossed him the keys. “How far is it?”

“About ten miles. I think it’s an industrial park.” He started the engine. Then he pushed an adapter into a power plug and placed the flashing blue light on the dashboard.

As Pam buckled her seatbelt, T.J. floored the gas pedal, lurching them forward. The tires squealed out of the lot and onto the road.

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Tom spoke clearly into his emergency radio. “Medic One to dispatch.”

“Medic One, go ahead.”

“Dispatch, I’m at the scene. Requesting Rescue Flight Helicopters and all available medical rescue units to this location. Alert the burn unit. Be advised, this building is fully involved. Over.”

“Roger that, Chief,” the dispatcher replied. “They’re on their way. Neighboring towns are also responding. Over.”

Stepping out of his truck, Tom looked around. Walls of orange flames, laced with thick black smoke, danced high in the afternoon sky. It was as if they were in tune to the tempo of the sirens piercing the air. He released a deep breath. The flames had already spread through two of the factory’s neighboring buildings in the industrial complex. Fueled now, they moved on at a seemingly unstoppable pace. Taking in the scene, he whispered, “If you’ve got a minute, Lord, we could sure use some help around here.”

At that instant, three fire trucks appeared and expertly parked near the hydrant. At the same time, Tom could hear helicopter blades in the distance. A half dozen ambulances and police cruisers followed. “Thanks,” he whispered, welcoming them with a wave. “Good to know you’re listening.”

“Tom!”

T.J.? He turned to find his young cousin right behind him.

“Look who I got!”

Tom’s glance darted from the teen’s beaming face to the tall blonde in khakis and a blue, pinstriped shirt. He stopped mid-stride, as if colliding into a stone wall. Pam!

Tentative, she met his shocked gaze. “Where do you want me?”

Chapter Eleven

A brilliant moon illuminated Tom’s route to the stone-covered driveway leading to his house. Rusty, his golden retriever, and Delilah, the black lab, met him at the door, barking and jumping hello.

“Hey, guys,” he greeted, allowing them to lick his face. He rubbed each of them behind the ears. “How’s it going? Ready for one last run before

hitting the hay?”

Happily they trotted after him and out the sliding glass doors to the large backyard.

“Pam likes animals,” Tom shouted, watching them stretch their limbs. “That’s a good thing!”

He felt himself utter a sigh. As if content. How strange. Pondering the new sensation, he leaned against the fence and deeply inhaled the familiar aromas of cattle and crops sharing thousands of acres of fertile land. His land. His family’s land.

Off in the distance, he could see row after row of cornstalks and wheat, dancing in the shadows. If he turned around, he knew he’d find a different sight not too far off in the distance: The silhouettes of huge, expensive homes, built on property once belonging to his ex-wife.

Just turn the page, Tom told himself. No reason to go there and get his gut all tied up in a knot. Not after the night he’d just had. No, he switched back to consider life’s irony.

He recalled many times when he seriously resented the constant commitment this working farm required. It weighed him down, like a huge chain around his neck, prohibiting him from leaving it alone for more than a day or two. He’d felt trapped. Like a prisoner, serving a life sentence. During high school, it didn’t matter how big a hangover he suffered from the night before, partying with his friends. He’d better be out in the barn milking the cows with his dad and brother by dawn. Otherwise, there’d be heck to pay. Sub-zero temperatures, knee-high snow, or even hundred-and-two fevers provided no excuse.

“A successful farm is like a woman,” his father told him more than once. “It needs constant and loving tending to. And appreciation for what it provides. Ignore it, even briefly, and you’ve got a disaster on your hands.”

“That’s for sure,” Tom whispered into the distance.

It became harder after high school, when a few of his friends abandoned their family farms to go to college out of state. None of them came back afterward, except for short visits with their new wives. Then they’d tell their stories of making big money, living in the large cities and determined to stay there. The thought of returning permanently to Middleton was tantamount to failure. They spent their entire lives trying to escape. They’d move back only if there was no other alternative.

Many times they urged Tom to join them. “You got a brother. Let him and your old man run the place,” they’d say.

But Tom’s younger brother thought like them. He’d be gone soon, and Tom couldn’t leave his father in the lurch. It just wouldn’t be right. Still, there were many times when Tom considered breaking out. The strongest pull came when Pam and her parents moved back to Boston after the accident. Man, how he detested the trapped feeling that hovered over him. The imaginary chains tightened to the point where, at times, he could hardly catch a breath.

Strangely, it wasn’t his sense of duty and obligation to his parents that kept him that time. It was the baby. His baby. He and Susan arranged to get married to provide the child with a family. By that time, he knew Pam would always be the love of his life. But his child needed a father. And for better or worse, he needed to fill those shoes. Unfortunately, Susan always brought out the worst in him.

With seven years between him and Pam, they’d had few mutual friends except Eddie and Megan. Though he doubted Pam knew Susan personally, Susan knew her. Probably because of Tom’s obvious interest in the cute, city girl.

“She’s an outsider,” Susan often snarled, her voice laced with acid over the telephone. She became angry when Tom stopped asking her out and then turned down her suggestions that they get together. When he didn’t return her calls, she’d call his house late at night. Many times he suspected she’d been drinking. She’d heard about Pam through the proverbial grapevine gossip that ran rampant around town. “What’s this about little miss fancy pants?” she’d demand, accusingly. “Always going around, trying to prove how smart she is. What would you want with her? Better yet, what would she want with you?”

Tom tended to ignore the constant little feuds that took place between women. The pettiness, the envy or jealousy. If anything, he found those types of scenes comical. He had no idea how threatened Susan felt, even after they married. Nor did he take seriously her plan to merge the Jarrod and Murphy land holdings to form a great dynasty, as she called it, and subdivide it to sell to a developer.

If you asked Tom, Susan watched too much television. What she was describing sounded like the 1980s evening soap opera, Dynasty, with her

playing the Joan Collins role. He didn't understand, until too late, that Susan meant every word she said. And she was determined to get her way.

So, although the noose tightened, he stayed. He called and wrote Pam for nearly a year. Then gave up. Years later, when he became convinced his marriage was doomed, he thought about taking off again. Then, one day his father showed up at the city house where Tom and Susan lived. It had been a wedding present from her father.

"There's a few cows looking like they got through the fence. They're straying onto Parson's place. I need a hand."

"Sure, Dad," Tom answered. He hoped the physical labor would take his mind off his problems.

John Jarrod stayed silent during the entire ten-minute trip. Which was fine with Tom. He wasn't sure he could control himself to utter anything other than obscenities at the time. When they got to the farm, he noticed two of their five horses were saddled up, looking like they were waiting for them.

"Let's go for a ride," his father said, not waiting for a reply. Silent again, they rode to the top of the highest point of their property, overlooking their land for miles around.

His father slowed the horse. "No matter what, Son," he began. "This land belongs to you. Sometimes, it doesn't yield as much as we want. And most times, I know, it seems like just one big pain in the butt. But it will always be here for you."

Tom and his father never shared what one could call a really close relationship. Sure they got along, but John Jarrod was a quiet man. He came and went as he pleased, he worked hard and long, and he held a lot close to the chest. This was the first time Tom could remember him using so many words at one time. And, to Tom's surprise, he wasn't finished.

"I guess it was the way I was raised, but I always figured you, me, and your brother would always live here and work the land and the animals together. Sure, you'd get married, have some kids, but we'd always be together." He shrugged. "It sort of threw me when Ted said he wanted to go to college. It shocked me more when he didn't move back after graduating. I don't like it, but I've tried to understand and accept it. The same way I've tried to understand you marrying Susan and moving into that big, fancy house in town." He paused to adjust the Phillies baseball cap shadowing the midday sun from his face. Then sighed.

“I guess I really can’t blame you. People just don’t stay put the way they used to. And there are so many choices now. So many opportunities that weren’t available in my younger days. It wasn’t that way for me growing up. My life, like your grandfather’s, even your mom’s, was already mapped out for me.

“I got to tell you. After you moved out of the house, I gave it only a couple of weeks before you didn’t turn up one morning to work the cows. It’s tough enough dragging ourselves out of bed at those awful hours, just to walk a few yards to the barn. A twelve-mile trip each day, two times a day, was asking a bit much I figured.”

Tom realized his father was now looking at him. “Maybe I’m talking too soon, but it hasn’t happened yet. You’ve showed up every day, even more on time than when we lived under the same roof. I want to thank you for that.”

To Tom, this entire conversation was unimaginable. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat.

“Sure, Dad.”

“I guess the reason I brought you out here today was because I wanted you to know that Mom and I understand if you want out. For a while or for however long you need. We can sell a bunch of acres and give you the cash. Sort of like part of your inheritance in advance, if that’s what you want. You got to live your life. This business with Susan is…” he shook his head. “I can’t tell you the right thing to do.” He shrugged.

“I don’t know what the right thing is, Son. Just, just do what you got to do. And know that no matter what, no matter how long you take, remember this…” He pointed out to the horizon, “All this, for good or bad, will always be waiting for you.”

Tom couldn’t remember the last time he cried in front of his father. Or when he last cried, period. Looking out into the distance, he blinked back the tears.

“And when I die,” his dad continued, this time with a lighter tone, “if you want to sell the whole thing to one of those big developers Susan’s always harping about, do it with my blessings. Just be sure to take good care of Mom and those boys of yours.”

Tom couldn’t believe those words came out of his father’s mouth. Amazed, he could only stare.

“You heard me right,” the old man grinned. “If something causes you misery, and you’ve done your absolute best to put things right, but it just ain’t working, you move on, Man! Life ain’t no dress rehearsal. This is the real show!” With that, he turned the horse around. “Race you back!”

That conversation created a turning point in Tom’s life. No longer did he feel the need to flee his family’s legacy. Instead, it became his haven. He would not divorce Susan, he decided. If she wanted out, she could start the proceedings. In the meantime, while they remained man and wife, he would not cheat, and he would always be civil toward her, even friendly, if she’d allow it. With one stipulation. She could forget any of her real estate plans involving the Jarrod property. That topic was not up for discussion.

But Susan refused to let it rest. Numerous times, too many to count, she brought it up, over and over again. She even got her real estate license. And each time, Tom’s answer remained the same. He would not be part of any type of two-family merger. Nor would he meet with the land developer she’d been pestering him about to parcel off a large chunk and build half-million-dollar homes. Being the exclusive broker for the project, she could earn a hefty sum, but Tom wasn’t willing to hear any of it. She could do what she wanted with her family’s land. And leave his family’s land alone.

Stretching, Tom shrugged off the old memories, like someone removing an old, rain-soaked slicker. He looked up at the stars decorating the sky. Even now, it never ceased to amaze him how easily he could connect the dots to the Big Dipper and other constellations. And the planet Jupiter still continued to burn bright, slightly below the moon. Tonight it looked like they were winking specifically at him.

Tom’s thoughts turned back to Pam. There he was, resolved to cast aside the romantic images he’d been conjuring up to protect her from Susan’s wrath.

Then poof! Once in her presence, her eyes pouring into his, all his concerns vaporized. Of course Pam’s feelings mattered too, but at least she didn’t call him names or forbid him to come near her. In fact, unless he read her wrong, she seemed pleased to see him once the shock wore off.

“I like her, Lord,” he voiced aloud. “I always have. I know she’s got some concerns about being back here. And a lot of bad memories. I didn’t know she blamed herself. I feel awful about that. I should have been there for her. I’ve got so much making up to do. I’d just like for her to give me the chance. And if she does, please help out in the Susan department. Pam

is totally innocent there. I don’t want her or the boys subjected to any more crap.”

Tom paused a moment, hoping his message reached its destination. Raised Christian, he grew up believing in God. His personal faith, however, had developed and deepened through his experience with his failed marriage. It began that afternoon when he and his dad took that ride together. Since then, though not overtly religious, he became convinced life held no coincidences.

Once Tom opened his heart and his mind, the numerous events that followed taught him that lesson. Life was no longer a shoot-from-the-hip kind of adventure, or a trial-and-error, see-as-you-go kind of thing. He knew better now. He also knew that God operated according to His own timetable. In fact, sometimes it felt like He was on vacation, so to speak. Yes, some prayers were better left unanswered. But hopefully that would not be the case where Pam was concerned.

“Come on in, guys,” he called to the dogs. He felt lighter than he’d felt in years. “Let’s try to get some shuteye. Today’s already here!”

Closing up the house for the night, Tom heard his cell phone ring.

“Okay, where is it?” he muttered, scanning the counters and tabletops. At the same time, he wondered who would call now. The factory fire entered his thoughts. He hoped it hadn’t reignited.

Finally, he spotted the phone on top of the refrigerator.

“Jarrod here,” he answered, without checking the caller ID.

“You’d better tell Eddie Cartwright to watch his mouth!”

Tom’s subconscious recognized the voice before he did, causing his entire body to tense into a huge knot. “Tell him yourself, Susan.”

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Twenty-One

Hearing the passion and conviction in Tom’s voice, seeing the strength and determination in his eyes, Pam felt her heart ache to cry out, Yes!

Instead, she forced herself to accept the hopelessness of the situation. She gave him only a single nod.

He grabbed her in a huge hug. “Then say it! Say it out loud!”

For a fraction of a second everything stilled. Then, suddenly feeling lightheaded and giddy, she whispered, “Yes.”

“Yes what?” The corners of Tom’s mouth curved. His blue eyes shimmered.

“Yes. I love you.”

He pulled her in a tight embrace. “See. Now that wasn’t too hard. Was it?”

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Pam unlocked the door to her condo a little after seven the next evening.

“Yeah, Bill. It’s Tom.” She overheard Tom say into the phone. He was speaking to Middleton’s deputy police chief.

“Thanks for getting back to me. I’m looking to locate an old file. Yeah. Fourteen years old, to be specific. Remember back then, that fatal car crash involving the three teenagers?”

Too familiar with the details, Pam headed to her bedroom to change. That part was out of her hands now. Tom had insisted on opening up the case. Reluctantly, she relented. On the condition that it be kept quiet. On top of everything else, she loathed being referred to as the lone survivor of “that horrible accident.”

Tom met her with a huge hug when she returned to the living room. Enjoying the feel of him, so close, she marveled at how comfortable it felt for him to be there. With her, in her home.

After a passionate kiss, he led her to the couch. “Hey. Look what I found.” He pointed to a pile of books on the coffee table.

Pam read a few titles out loud. “Hypnosis or Hocus Pocus? Memory Recall, Using Hypnosis to Unlock Your Subconscious.” She shot him a skeptical look. “Please tell you me you’re joking.”

Tom diverted his gaze to the ceiling, the floor, the corner. Then back to her, flashing a wide grin.

Suspicious, Pam narrowed her eyes. “Thomas Jarrod! What did you do?”

“I told Bill Houser everything. He thinks it became a police matter the minute someone broke into your hotel room.”

“Okay, but…”

He took her face in his hands and peered into her eyes. “Trust me?”

An interesting question. She wanted to trust him. She arched an eyebrow. “Maybe. But…”

“Good. And no buts. I also spoke with Rebecca, Eddie’s wife. She read something in one of her medical psychology books about your condition. It’s not unusual. Lots of victims and folks who witness crimes can’t recall specific details. Hypnosis can help unlock the memories. Here. Take a look a these case studies.” He placed an open book in front of her. “Some are very similar to yours. And they’ve had great success.”

Pam felt a lump rise to her throat. It burned from the bile churning upward from her gut, threatening to cut off her air supply. Her premonition about that day of reckoning was quickly turning into a reality. If she said no to Tom’s idea, there could be no hope for a normal life together. It wouldn’t matter where they decided to live.

On the other hand, did she really want to relive the whole horrible experience again? She shivered. Because it went deeper than that. And she felt really guilty about it. But in fact, did she really want to know the truth? It was one thing for her to think she caused it. It would be a whole other story to know for sure.

Her head ached with confusion. Was that message in the hotel bathroom just a sick joke? she wondered. A one-time occurrence? Or was it really a warning for her to stay away from Middleton?

“So, what do you think?” Tom asked, eager and excited.

The phone rang before she could answer.

She stuck out her tongue at him and rose to find the cordless phone. “Momentarily saved by the bell. It’s probably the hospital.”

She found the phone in her bedroom. “Hello?”

“June 25, 1994.”

“Excuse me?” Pam’s heart started to pound.

“June 25, 1994,” a raspy voice repeated. Then the line went dead.

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Thirty-One

“She did it on purpose,” Rebecca said, refilling her glass with lemonade.

Pam crunched on a carrot stick. They sat on the couch in the sunroom and had a clear view of the driveway. “Any idea why?”

Rebecca shook her head. “It could be a zillion reasons—one being to detract attention from you and paint herself in a good light. Remember, next to you, Susan looks like the wicked witch of the west from The Wizard of Oz. She probably realized she needed to improve her image, especially if she expects to get sympathy from the zoning board.”

Pam tapped her hand in thought. “So if Susan decides to pretend to put their troubles behind them, Tom needs to do the same thing and withdraw his objection to her plan. Otherwise, he will look like the bad guy. Right?”

“Exactly,” Rebecca agreed, reaching for a stuffed mushroom. “Like tonight, for instance, she won either way. If Tom refused to see the kids, especially after all this time, he’d be portrayed as a rotten father. It doesn’t matter that he’d made other plans. If he really cared, he’d break or at least change them. And if he agreed…”

A new voice broke in. “Then Susan still looks good because everyone at the party will get to see the boys. They’ll think she’s making an effort to resolve their differences. They’ll expect Tom to do the same.”

Pam and Rebecca turned to find Katie Jarrod approaching. Tall and thin like her son, she wore her silver hair short, in a stylish cut. A lovely, teal, beaded dress flowed gracefully around her while she carried in a tray of shrimp cocktail.

“That was very understanding of you to encourage Tom to see the boys this evening,” she told Pam. She set down the platter on the buffet table. “You’ve made this a doubly festive occasion.”

Pam wondered how she should respond, then noted tears rimming the older woman’s eyes. Without a second thought, she reached for her hand. Katie squeezed tight while her expression said thank you.

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“Hi Dad,” A.J. greeted cheerfully. He gave his father a big hug. Mark, always the more reserved of the two, stood there looking like he didn’t know quite what to do.

Tom scooped both boys up and buried himself in their embraces. Thank you so much, God, he prayed. Thank you protecting them. For keeping

them healthy. For everything. His dad was right. They didn't hate him. In fact, they seemed fine. Even happy to see him. He wiped a tear on Mark's shirt before standing up to deal with their mother.

"Hey. What about me?" Tom Sr. asked.

Thrilled, the boys ran to their grandfather.

"Let's go find Grandma," Tom Sr. suggested. "I know she's anxious to get a look at the two of you."

Tom noticed A.J. glance at his mother for her approval. Ever so slightly, Susan gave him a nod.

They grabbed his dad's hands. "Let's go, Grandpa!"

"You're looking well, Thomas."

Tom could tell his ex-wife was making an enormous effort to appear civil. Maybe even pleasant. Even so, he detected a hiss at the end of his name. He waited until the boys were inside before turning his attention to her.

"You too." Knowing Susan as he did, Tom braced himself for the price she would expect him to pay in exchange for this seemingly magnanimous gesture on her part. He practically bit his tongue to stop from demanding to know what it would be. Instead, he thought back to the advice they'd received from a family mediator during the divorce proceedings.

"Keep your tone cordial," he'd told them. "Try to treat your exchange like a business meeting. You don't have to like a person to do business with them."

That guy was the only 'helping professional' Tom encountered who acted like he had any common sense. Tom even consulted with the man privately. But that was short lived. Sure the guy had a lot of insight. And even some other helpful suggestions. But Susan wasn't concerned with agreements. She enjoyed the fight—plain and simple. And she was good at it.

"When should I bring the boys back?"

"Aren't you going to invite me in? It looks like you're having quite a party."

The hurt-little-girl routine rubbed his already thin nerves raw. If she were a man, he'd tell her she had a lot of audacity to even suggest such a thing. She didn't want to go inside. She hated his parents. She'd said as much to them and anyone else within earshot on more than one occasion.

She just wanted to needle him. Please God, he prayed. I don't want a scene. Give me the right words to say.

"Hey, Jarrod! Whatcha doing out there?"

Eddie. Tom wasn't sure if he was God's response to his request, but he'd take it. "Thanks," he whispered to his best friend.

"Oh, Susan. Didn't we just see each other last Thursday. Isn't that twice too often in this decade?" Eddie chided.

Susan obviously seethed. Tom pursed his lips in a straight line to hold back a grin. Clearly, Eddie's presence infuriated her. For whatever reason, whenever he appeared, she usually backed away from whatever game she was playing.

Her eyes blazed with warning. "Bring them home by nine!"

"It's the weekend, cousin, and your ex's engagement party. Try as you might, you will not ruin it. The boys will be brought home by eleven." Then he waved. "Bye-bye."

Susan's eyes shot him with arrows. She scrunched up her lips, no doubt biting back something vile. Instead, she swung open the car door and angrily got behind the wheel. Eddie stepped forward and closed her inside. Then with an arm around Tom, he urged him toward the house. "Don't look back. If she runs us over, at least there will be plenty of witnesses."

Relieved to end the scene, Tom complied. He knew Susan would find a way to make him pay eventually, but for now he was thankful for the reprieve. "When are you going to tell me what you have on her that makes her listen to you?"

Eddie waved him off. "It's no big deal. Glad I could be of help. Now get your butt in there and find your kids and fiancée."

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"Grandma!" the boys called in union. The pounding footsteps bounced into the room and into Katie's arms.

Watching the scene, Pam held her breath to keep her eyes from welling. A.J. and Mark seemed genuinely happy to see their grandmother. And Katie's face beamed with pride and joy.

"You did good, kid," Eddie whispered to Pam.

Then she felt Tom's arm around her waist. "Have I told you today how much I love you?"

Pam couldn't remember ever feeling so...she couldn't even find a word to describe the warm and wanted feeling that washed over her. Thank you,

Lord, she whispered. She leaned back against Tom and rested her hands on his.

Her gut reaction to include the boys at the party was simply that. It just seemed like the right thing to do. After all, they would soon be her stepsons. She really disliked that term. It made her recall an old episode from the Brady Bunch. Bobby got the off-the-wall idea that stepparents couldn't love their stepkids as much as their "real" kids, so he ran away. When he returned, Carol Brady showed him the steps leading upstairs. She told him, "These are the only steps in this house." And that's how Pam felt.

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"I don't know what I should do," Tom said later.

Immediately, Pam understood what he was talking about. From their places, Eddie, Rebecca, Pam and Tom watched the boys in the adjoining room playing a game of Monopoly with their cousins. T.J. Jr. led the group, clearly enjoying his role as banker.

"What do you mean?" Eddie asked.

"I haven't seen them in almost two years, and here we are acting like nothing happened. Should I try to explain? And what about Pam here? Should I be having them make an effort to get to know her?"

Pam had no idea. Sure, under ordinary circumstances she'd like that. But this was such a delicate situation.

Fortunately, Rebecca came to the rescue. Wiping barbeque sauce from her fingers, she said, "You're doing fine. And they're doing fine. Just leave them be. There'll be plenty of time to get serious later."

That sounded good to Pam. She just hoped Rebecca was right about there being time in the future. What if tonight was just a ruse to catch Tom off guard and try to interfere in their celebration? Then she stopped. Even if that was Susan's intent, it had failed. It was a beautiful party.

With that thought in mind, Pam reminded herself she was not in control. All she could do was pray and do her best. God would handle the rest. She swallowed. From past experience, she knew sometimes that was easier said than done.

"Have you set a date yet?" Katie walked up and asked. "I know you mentioned sometime after Christmas, but everyone wants to know when."

Pam's gaze flew to Tom. Secretly, they had spoken earlier about the possibility of eloping. But now seeing all the trouble his mom went through for this evening and the hopeful look in her eyes, Pam gave Tom a look that

said, She wants a wedding. A real wedding. She'd be crushed if she and your dad weren't there.

Nodding, Tom placed his hand over hers. "How about March? The weekend that falls closest to the 17th?"

"It's the anniversary of our first date," Pam added, feeling her face flush.

Katie jumped to her feet. "Well, let's get out the calendar."

"My mom said there won't be a wedding."

All eyes focused on the innocent nine-year-old boy who had entered the room.

Truths Unveiled

Chapter Forty-One

"Two men?" Eddie questioned. "At the accident? Since when?"

Perplexed, Tom tossed a pen down on his desk and paced the length of his office at the rescue station. "Since Friday night. One of the staff shrinks approached Pam at MMC's dinner dance. Out of the blue, he floored her by seeking her out and telling her Ryan Collins wasn't drinking the night of the accident."

Eddie let out a troubling whistle and took a chair at the small, round table. "Well ain't that just grand? We've got a medical report and a police report that say something different."

"No kidding."

"Go on," Eddie urged, unwrapping a meatball sub. "What happened next?"

"That night, Pam had a bad dream. A very clear dream of the accident. Way beyond what she recalled during the first hypnosis session."

Tom continued to fill him in on the details. "A few days later we got an emergency session with DeOreo, the hypnotist guy. He was able to sort out the events in the dream when he put Pam under."

Eddie swallowed a mouthful and washed it down with a big gulp of soda. "Surprise, surprise."

“You’re telling me.” Scowling, Tom reached for his coffee mug. “I knew there was more to the accident. Pam told me so after the first session. She thought she might have missed something. Or that something wasn’t quite right. Still, she was able to accept all of what she did recall. That’s what helped her to handle the situation and to move back here. But Tedford’s remark, followed by the new dream, the break-in, and discovering that there were two strangers at the accident scene…” Shaking his head, he frowned and scratched his head. “The situation is even more confusing than before.”

“And she has no idea who these guys are?”

Tom made a aggravated face. “No.”

“Okay. I’ve heard enough.” With that, Eddie rose to his full height and reached for the phone. “There’s too much missing here. Too many holes. Too many sudden revelations. And both you and I know there were more than three photographs taken at the accident scene. Somebody’s playing games.”

Tom nodded. “I know. And the idea makes me sick. At this point, I’m open to any suggestions.”

Eddie dialed a number. “And I know someone who may be able to offer a few.”

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Pam parked her Volvo in her new parking space at the medical center and switched off the ignition. Glancing at her watch, she estimated the entire trip, to and from the bridal shop and mall, took just under five hours. Going seventy most of the way. She rolled her eyes. At least she’d bought most of what she needed. Shoes, garter, and lace thigh-highs. Even gifts for her maid of honor, Tom’s best man, and the ushers.

Stepping out of the vehicle, she smiled and stretched. Hills and fields, dotted with silos and animals, surrounded her for miles. Then she gulped. Okay. So things weren’t perfect. Someone was trying to scare her away and the accident didn’t happen the way she’d originally thought. And Carl Tedford said that Ryan Collins wasn’t drinking that night. But hey, who said life was meant to be perfect? She twisted her lips into a smirk. Hey, God. I hope you’re getting all of this.

With that thought in mind, Pam closed the door and caught a glimpse of her wedding gown draped across the back seat. She thought of the wedding. All the arrangements had been made. They’d decided to hold the reception

at Tom and Eddie's restaurant downtown. Tom's mom had handled the church, managing to convince the minister he could let Pam and Tom take a crash course in the marriage class instead of the long, drawn-out version. That meant they would be busy every night this week.

Katie also took care of the invitation list. Close to all of the one hundred guests had already responded. That left the music. Dan, Tom's cousin, volunteered there. His band played all the local places and had just cut their first CD. Last, Eddie volunteered to videotape and Rebecca offered to take photographs. What more could I want? Pam asked herself. Uttering a small prayer, she headed inside.

Greeting the staff, Pam noted the ED was quiet. Good. Though her shift didn't start for another few hours, she'd feel compelled to help out if they needed an extra hand. Now she had time to grab a sandwich from the cafeteria and make some phone calls.

"Dr. Harrington? I have a message for you."

Pam turned and headed back to the nurses' station. "Thanks." Reading the pink slip, she frowned. The call was from Susan. Pam released a snarl. I forgot to add her to the not so perfect list, she thought to herself. What could that woman want?

Pam decided to go directly to the cafeteria. Dealing with her fiancé's ex-wife required fortitude. Maybe she should reach Tom before she returned the call. If she decided to return the call. He might know what it was about.

Pondering Susan's motives, Pam prepared to enter the elevator as the doors opened.

"Isn't this convenient?" the cool redhead greeted. "You're just the person I've been looking for."